



Seasons

A Novella

by

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SEASONS

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BETH

Whoever coined the phrase *you can never go home* should be an honorary Mensa member. Beth Hanson tightens her grip on T.J.'s hand, a miniature replica of Tyler's, and sweeps her eyes down Main Street—Old Highway 49. It's the first day in six years she's stepped onto Sutter Creek soil, so to speak, and a few months from now, she prays it'll be her last. Back to Arizona a wealthier, happier widow. A new season, both literally and figuratively.

T.J. tugs on her hand, his little legs ineffectively churning. "Let's go, Mommy."

"Wait for Auntie Shell. She's locking the car."

"But I see a candy store and a toy store."

Beth reels him in and combs the baby-soft hair from his forehead. It's time for a trim. "Nothing is open. It's New Year's Day, remember?"

"Then why're we here?"

"I told you, buddy. To look at the place my grandma left me."

"The BB?" He cranes his neck to look at her, nose scrunched.

She laughs. After seeing *The Christmas Story* he's now as enamored with BB guns as Ralphie. "Not BB, sweetie. A B and B. It's short for bed and breakfast."

Michelle joins them and takes T.J.'s other hand. "You ready to

meet your future?" She's been playing that song since she picked them up at the Sacramento Airport.

Beth draws in a deep breath and the tang of burning wood stoves and winter nip fills her lungs. "Let it go, Shell. I'm *not* staying." She glances at her friend and sister-in-law over T.J.'s head. "You *did* hire the contractor, right?"

"Yes, *Mom*," Michelle says with a sigh. "I hired the contractor, just like you asked."

T.J. snickers. "She's not your mom."

"I was being sarcastic, kiddo."

"What's scastic?"

Beth gives his hand a squeeze. "Something you don't need to learn." Eyes forward once again, she scans the near-empty street lined with antique shops, restaurants and specialty stores. Disneyland-clean. She gives the Christmas decorations only a passing glance as memories of a previous life flash with the intensity of high-speed photography—before she can grasp one, another replaces it.

"He's here." Michelle's steps falter, and she drops T.J.'s hand.

"Who?"

"The contractor." She points to the back-end of a red truck parked at the curb in front of Main Street B&B. "He's not supposed to start until tomorrow."

Aside from evidence that a contractor was indeed hired, Beth's more interested in the old Victorian. Too bad the trees are so overgrown. Even leafless, she can't get a clear view. Just a few more steps.

"Hey, Beth." Michelle twists her wedding ring, eyes darting to the truck and back. "There's something I really should tell you. I thought I'd have time. I mean, I wasn't expecting him to be here."

Beth doesn't wait for her. The old place could sell for a small fortune, if what she gleaned from the Internet search on California real estate was accurate. Enough that she can pay Mom and Dad the money they lent her over the years, finish her degree and put T.J. in a Christian school when he starts kindergarten next fall. And maybe, Catalina Hills prices what they are, she can afford to buy a small

home. No more renting. No more two jobs to make ends meet. No more precarious future.

“Beth!” Michelle stands at the curb, her plump body blocking the contractor’s name on the Dodge truck.

“Mommy, look.” T.J. tugs his hand loose from Beth’s and disappears in the overgrown forest-of-a-yard. His voice floats from inside the hedge barrier. “There’s a tire swing.”

“T.J.” Beth starts to follow.

“He’ll be fine,” Michelle says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I need to talk to you. Please.”

What is *with* her? “Fine, Shell. What?”

She steps aside, wringing her hands like an old grandma. *Kingsford Construction* is splashed across the bed.

Beth’s heart drops then settles. “You hired Connor Kingsford?” Working with the elder Kingsford will have its drawbacks—resentment and discomfort, mixed with a little bitterness—but she can handle it, can’t she? After all, it’s not Connor’s fault that his son—

“Not Connor.” Michelle’s eyes are fixed on Beth’s, as if they’ll forewarn her response.

Beth’s heart drops again, the bass drum beat filling her lungs. “Not Connor?”

Michelle shakes her head. “He retired. Three years ago.”

“Then—”

“Hey.”

The deep voice from behind has Beth whipping around. Luke Kingsford. The man responsible for her husband’s death.



Luke

IT TAKES a scant second for Luke to read Beth Hanson’s face—flaring nostrils, pinched lips and two spots of color on her otherwise pale cheeks. No doubt, her attitude hasn’t softened over the last several years. Still beautiful, too. A little thinner, maybe, hard to tell with her

bundled into a heavy coat. It seems the last six years have been kind to her.

“There’s been a mistake.” Her words come out stiff-like, as if her jaw’s frozen shut.

“No mistake.” He clips the thick tape measure onto his belt. “Just checking a few measurements. Once I get your input, I’ll place an order at the hardware store tomorrow.”

Beth’s mouth opens and shuts, like a gasping fish, before she finds her words. “Don’t bother with the order. I’m *not* going to work with you!” She pushes a strand of dark hair behind her ear with a quick, jerky motion.

What did he expect? That time would somehow reveal the truth? “I signed a contract. You want to get rid of me, you’ll have to ante up the deposit.” Might be easier all around if she did so. Working side by side with her would be tantamount to death by torture. Only a fool would choose that path.

But he’d been that on more than one occasion. Most often where she was concerned.

She turns on Michelle. “What have you *done*?”

“I hired the low bid, just like you asked.”

Luke knows better. Michelle has an ulterior motive, and had he not seen this as an opportunity to right some wrongs, he’d call her on it.

Beth steps into Michelle’s space, as if a few inches would mute her words. “You *hired* the man who got your *brother* killed.”

Nope. She hasn’t softened one iota.

“Hey, look!”

Jake turns to see a kid, no more than five, pointing at his truck.

“Is that your dog, Mister?”

Miter, Luke’s golden retriever, sticks his head out the open cab window, ears perked, as if he knows he’s the center of attention.

“You like dogs?”

“Mommy says I can have one when we get a real house.”

“Come on, T.J.” Beth waves the boy toward her. “It’s time to go.”

“But I wanna see the doggie first. And we didn’t get to see the BB yet.”

Luke rests on his haunches, eye-level with the boy. So like Tyler, there’s no mistaking this is his kid. “His name’s Miter. I’ll introduce you if you like.” He glances at Beth. “If it’s okay with your mom.”

Arms crossed tight against her middle, she gives him one quick nod.

T.J. runs ahead, his little arms stretching high to reach the door handle. “Why’s his name Miter?”

Luke nabs Miter’s collar through the window with one hand and slips the other under T.J.’s to open the door. “Miter’s a type of saw I use. I figured with a name like that, he’d be comfortable hanging out on the construction site.”

Luke gives Miter a hand signal. The dog jumps out of the truck and sits, thick tail sweeping the sidewalk.

“Can I pet him?” T.J. sticks out his hand and lets Miter sniff it.

Luke squats. “He’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

“Nice doggie.” T.J. drops to his knees and wraps his little arms around Miter’s neck, receiving a sloppy kiss as a reward.

“Okay, T.J.” Beth moves in takes the boy’s hand. “You got to pet the dog, now let’s go look at the house.”

Luke crosses his arms, leans against the truck and catches Michelle’s apologetic look, before focusing on Beth. “We need to discuss your budget.”

Her blue eyes snap at him, and he’s reminded of Tyler’s description of her—fire and ice. His friend couldn’t shut up about this young beauty he’d just met. The girl of his dreams. How he was gonna marry her. *Blah, blah, blah.* Enough to make Luke sick.

Until he met her for himself.

“You can’t be serious,” she says now. “Surely you see what a mistake it would be to work together.”

“I’m a professional.” It takes everything he has to keep his expression just that. Professional. Forget their past. The hurts. The history.

“Well, I’m not.” Color rises to her cheeks, and she glances at T.J. as

if to be sure he's not picking up on her anger. "I haven't signed any contracts, so consider this job *off* the table."

Luke watches as she hustles the miniature Tyler up the Victorian's bricked walkway then turns to Michelle, who has the grace to look embarrassed. "So, what've you got to say for yourself?"

Michelle meets his eyes with a grimace. "I'm sorry. I guess I made a mistake."

"A mistake?" He waves toward Beth. "You had to know this is how she'd react. You have any idea how much I gave up to take on this project?"

She crosses her arms and juts out a hip. "Then why'd you agree to take it on? You could've said no."

"Amazing." He throws both hands into the air, as if he could rid himself of this entire mess so easily. "You told me she knew the truth. I believe your exact words were, 'She's had a change of heart.' If *that's* —" he waves toward the now empty pathway "—an example of her softening..."

"Okay, Luke, I admit—"

"What's your game, Michelle?" He scrapes a hand through his military-short hair. Hasn't he suffered enough?

"I thought maybe if she saw you again. It was a stupid thing to do. I apologize. It's just..."

"What?"

She glances toward the house and sighs. "She needs to get past this if she's ever going to be happy again. And she can't get past it until she knows the truth."

Luke bit back a groan. Seriously *not* his problem. "Then why don't you tell her? Why drag her out here and put us both through this."

Tears pool in Michelle's dark eyes. "It's not my truth to tell."

BETH

“*Y*ou’re holding too tight, Mommy.” T.J.’s voice echoes in the empty foyer as he yanks his hand from Beth’s then scampers up the stairs.

“T.J.” Beth starts to follow but finds she doesn’t have the energy after the emotion-filled row with Luke. How *could* he show up here, knowing the pain he’s caused? And Michelle! What was she thinking? It’s as if her brother’s death means nothing to her.

She draws in a few breaths, a useless attempt to slow her heart rate, and swipes at the tears that track her cheek. *How often will I have to relive this pain, Lord? Isn’t it enough that you’ve taken my husband from me?* Why does she even bother to pray anymore? It didn’t do Job much good, either.

The pounding of little footsteps reaches her ears, and she looks up, as if she could see T.J. through the high, decorative ceiling. Stepping toward the wide stairway, she feasts her eyes upon the faded, flaking wallpaper and dark oak, scarred chair rail molding. The bannister is of the same wood, and she runs her hand over the smooth baluster while climbing the first of many steps.

Just as she remembers it.

“T.J.” Her voice bounces off the papered walls and echoes back to her. “Where are you?”

“In here.”

Not much help. There are at least seven rooms on the second floor, and a few more on the third. What was she thinking, taking on this mansion?

“Beth.” Michelle’s hesitant voice stops her on the landing. She stands at the front door, one foot inside, one foot out, as if fearful of her welcome. Well, she should be. “We need to talk.”

“I need to find T.J.”

“Look, I know you’re upset with me.” She steps into the foyer, but leaves the door open. For a quick escape, maybe? “I really believe Luke is the best person for this job.”

Beth glances up the stairs and back at Michelle with a sigh. “We should have had this talk *before* you hired him.”

“I know. But what’s done is done.”

“Hey, Mommy.” T.J. appears at the top of the stairs. “You gotta see the BB. There’s bunches of rooms and stairs and...” his little hands fly up and around as if he can’t contain the joy of such a find.

“I’m coming, sweetie.” Her lips twitch at his exuberance. Not unlike her own when she saw the palatial home for the first time. Or at least, what seemed palatial to a six-year-old girl.

“Luke’s waiting,” Michelle calls out as Beth follows T.J.

“Tell him not to bother.” *If she thinks I’m going to subject myself to—*
“Too late.”

The masculine voice has Beth tripping on the last step.

“If you’re done throwing your little tantrum, maybe we can get to work. I have Sunday dinner to get home to.”



Luke

LUKE DOESN'T WAIT for Beth to capitulate—that might not happen until the Second Coming—and ignores Michelle’s nervous hand-

wringing. Instead, he starts a mental inventory of the old Victorian. Wall paper needs to be stripped, stair rails and spindles refurbished. Hardwood floors seem to be in decent shape. Too much refurbish and it'll lose its charm.

He moves through the foyer and into the sitting room, while Beth stomps back down the stairs. Gearing up for battle, would be his guess. He keeps his back to her and continues his inventory. Windows might need to be replaced. Not a cheap proposition. But neither is heating a house this size with single-pane windows.

"Luke, this seriously isn't going to work." Her placating tone sounds like that of a kindergarten teacher. Might work on T.J., but it's not going to work on a thirty-five-year-old old man. "You must see how impossible this is."

Back still to Beth, Luke counts to ten. Twice. This lie has created a chasm for too long. Enough is enough. But when he finally faces her, ready to unload the truth, his resolve dissolves like salt on a snail. He's not willing to add to the pain already evident in her transparent eyes.

"If I didn't think I could handle it, I wouldn't have taken on the job. Might just be there are powers working here beyond what you or I want."

She barks out a humorless laugh. "You're going to blame God for this? Just perfect. I know this is an answer to *my* prayers." A smirk and eye roll punctuate her sarcasm.

"God works in mysterious ways."

She opens her mouth to respond, but T.J.'s pounding footsteps down the stairs has her snapping it shut again. No doubt, God's perfect timing. He flies past Michelle, hovering in the doorway, to the back of the house.

"Um, I'm just going to see what T.J.s up to," Michelle says, backing out of the room.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," Beth mutters.

Luke grimaces. Holding her hostage to a contract isn't his M.O. Never been one to stay where he's not wanted. "You win. If you want

out of the contract, that's fine by me. I'm even willing to recommend a couple other contractors."

"Really?" She smiles. The first he's seen from her in forever.

Too bad it's in response to him leaving.

"Sure. It might take a few months for anyone to clear their calendars, but—"

"A few months?" So much for her smile. "I was hoping to have this wrapped up by April, just in time for the spring market."

"Anyone worth his salt is going to be booked solid at least three or four months in advance."

She crosses her arms, head cocked. "If that's true, then how is it you're available?"

No way he's going to admit he bailed on three jobs when Michelle called him. "Just happened to have a cancellation." The lie doesn't sit well, and he throws up a quick prayer for forgiveness.

Staring at the floor, she blows out a breath and taps her chin with an index finger. Luke can practically see the thoughts spinning in her little brain. Is she willing to sell her soul to the proverbial devil or postpone what she hopes will be a financial windfall?

Decision apparently made, her head snaps up and she locks eyes with Luke. "Can you guarantee this job will be done by April 1st?"

He snorts. "No one can guarantee that."

"But—"

"It's a remodel, Beth. This house is, what..." He takes a quick scan of the room with its dark crown molding and yellowed wall paper. "... A hundred and fifty years or more?"

"About that," she admits.

"I have no idea what I'll find until I start tearing into things. The wiring could be faulty, might be plumbing issues, or we could find mold, who knows? I checked the foundation from the outside and it looks solid, but there are still too many unknowns."

She looks so dejected, he's tempted to promise her anything, and the words are out before he can stop them. "However, I'll do everything in my power to have this job completed by April."

BETH

Sleeves pushed up past her elbows, Beth tucks into the stack of dishes with resolve. She may not be able to control the universe, or even her minute portion of it, but she can certainly control kitchen duty.

“You don’t need to do those,” Michelle protests, as she covers a half-eaten blueberry pie. “You’re company.”

“I haven’t been company for years.” She throws Michelle a smile over her shoulder.

“Well, you also did most of the cooking. Best dinner ever. I don’t know why you don’t open a restaurant.”

“I’ll squeeze it in between waitressing and raising T.J.”

“No, seriously. You have your grandma’s inheritance.”

Beth attacks the roasting pan with a vengeance. “Restaurants are expensive and Grandma’s inheritance stipulates that it has to be used for the B & B, with just enough left to cover expenses for a few months.”

“Once you sell it—”

“Life doesn’t work that way, Shell.”

“Are you still mad at me?”

Her question is almost lost in a squeal from T.J. in the front room. Laughter follows, and Beth can't help but smile. Paul is in heaven.

"Not mad, Michelle. Just disappointed."

"In me?"

"In life." Beth swipes at the sweat on her forehead with the back of a dripping hand as she turns to Michelle. "Aren't you sometimes? My husband dies protecting his country. Your husband, who'd love nothing more than to have a child of his own, has to be satisfied with a nephew. Where's the fairness in that?"

Michelle seems focused on the pie, smoothing the already smooth plastic over the edges. Something in her demeanor has Beth reaching for a dish towel. She leans her backside against the sink and wipes her hands.

"Everything okay?"

Michelle's eyes flit toward Beth and down again. "I should be asking you that. You hardly ate anything."

"You know me. Stress ties my stomach in knots. I'll make up for it later. So, what's your excuse?"

"What do you mean?"

"You weren't exactly packing away the roast beef and mashed potatoes. In fact, I bet you didn't eat much more than me."

"It's... It's nothing." She picks up the pie and turns to the fridge.

"Come on, Shell. Fess up. What's going on?"

"Just a little nauseous, is all." She snatches up a dish towel and plants herself next to Beth.

Beth narrows her eyes on her friend. She turned down the offer of wine at dinner, says she's nauseous and glows even though she hasn't been slaving over the dishes. She grabs Michelle's arm, causing her to nearly fumble the platter she's drying. "You're pregnant, aren't you?"

Michelle's cheeks pinken as she nods, her eyes not meeting Beth's.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's just with everything going on... "

Beth swallows a lump of shame. "Don't let my sour attitude rain on your parade, Shell. You and Paul have been trying for *years*. How can you not be shouting it to the world?"

“I’m only eleven weeks along. We want to wait until I’m in my second trimester before announcing it.”

“That’s why you didn’t tell me?”

With a sigh, Michelle drops the dish towel on the counter and faces Beth. “No. Aside from Paul, you’re my best friend. I wanted to tell you from the moment I found out. But you’ve been so—”

“Juvenile. Angry. A royal witch.”

Michelle laughs. “I wouldn’t go that far. It’s just that I feel bad that my dreams are coming true while yours...” She waves her hands around.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

Beth’s eyes well and she pulls Michelle in for a hug. “Don’t let anything dampen your joy. I’m so ecstatic for you and Paul. You’re going to be the best parents in the world.”

“Mommy.” T.J.’s voice reaches the kitchen before he does. “Can I have more pie?”

Beth gives Michelle one more quick hug before pulling back. “I think you’ve had your quota of sugar for the day, kiddo. Let’s get you ready for bed instead.”

“Aww. Do I hafta?” T.J. stands in the entrance, his little eyebrows furrowed. “Uncle Paul said we can watch a movie.”

“Not tonight, sweetie. It’s getting late and we have a big day tomorrow.” She squeezes Michelle’s hand before escorting T.J. out of the kitchen.

Paul sits on the couch in front of the flat screen, and as they move through the family room, Beth gives his shoulder a pat as she passes behind him. “Congrats, Daddy. I’m over the moon for you guys.”

A look of relief crosses his features when he turns to acknowledge Beth. “Really?”

“Are you kidding? It’s about time you two made me an aunt. I’ll be back down in a few to finish the dishes. Your wife needs her rest, so you might want to talk her into leaving the kitchen for me.”

Beth follows T.J. up the stairs, a zing of joy bubbling in her throat. A baby. Just when all hope was lost.

“Do I gotta brush my teeth?” T.J. asks.

“What do you think?”

With a groan, he makes a beeline for the bathroom.

Beth puts paste on his toothbrush and reaches for the step stool.

“I’m not a baby, Mommy. I can reach the sink all by myself.”

“I guess so.” Her smile wavers as she watches her sweet little boy brush his teeth, toothpaste oozing from his mouth. It was just yesterday he was learning to walk and talk. Before long, he’ll be too big for hugs and kisses—at least from his mom.

“Mr. Luke’s nice, isn’t he Mommy?” T.J., on tip-toes, spits toothpaste in the sink and reaches for the plastic cup. “And his doggie is super sweet.” He swishes water in his mouth and spits again.

The mention of Luke sours Beth’s joyful mood. “Yeah, bud. sweet dog.”

T.J. scrunches up his nose and catches Beth’s eye in the mirror. “Don’tcha like Mr. Luke?”

“Wipe your face, T.J.” She hands him a wet washcloth.

He swipes a pass over his mouth and hands the cloth back. “Don’tcha, Mom?”

“It’s not that I don’t like him, but—”

“You said we gotta love everyone. Just like Jesus. Right?” His blue eyes reach into her soul, as if it isn’t a five-year-old boy, but God himself reminding her of grace.

“Yeah, sweetie. Just like Jesus.”



Luke

“MOM OUTDID HERSELF. AGAIN.” Luke drops onto the Adirondack with a groan. Might have to undo the top button of his Levi’s.

Conner Kingsford nods in agreement. “Always does.”

Miter plops between the two men, his own groan matching that of his master.

Head back, Luke takes in the twinkle of stars in the crystal clear

sky. The January chill and tang of burning wood from the stove brings with it sentimental musings. New year. New season. Nothing better than sitting on the front porch contemplating life, but he should probably head home. Early day tomorrow. He needs all the fortification he can get to face the immutable Beth Hanson.

“What’s on your docket for tomorrow? Going to take a day off for once?”

Luke laughs. His dad always could read his mind. “I wish. Kind of got myself into a bind.”

“Yeah?” Conner glances at his son. “What’s that?”

“I agreed to take on the Main Street B & B.”

Connor’s eyes narrow. “What are you, a glutton for punishment? I thought we decided you should steer clear of that job.”

“The job isn’t the problem.”

“When are you going to learn you can’t take on the world’s problems, Son?”

Miter stands and maneuvers until his chin rests on Luke’s thigh.

Luke strokes the dog’s head. Always the best stress reliever. “It’s not as dire as that, Dad. It’s just...”

“Just what?” He snorts. “As if I don’t know. I’m sorry as I can be about Tyler, but Beth isn’t your responsibility.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?” He sits up and leans his elbows on his knees, drawing closer to Luke. “Then why’d you take that job?”

Luke shrugs. “Tyler was my best bud. Since I was what? Five? Six?”

“About that.” He chuckles. “The two of you had your mom and me on our knees every night for years. Praying the good Lord would keep you safe. It’s a wonder you both survived childhood.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Luke admits. “Must have had a platoon of guardian angels protecting us.” He swallows. “Too bad they didn’t follow Tyler to Iraq.”

“You did your best to talk him out of re-upping. No matter what Beth might think, you’re the last person to be blamed for his death.”

“Well, she doesn’t see it that way.” Not so sure he does, either. He’s

quiet for a moment, taking in the darkness beyond the porch and the muted laughter of his mom and sister in the kitchen. The distant sound of cars on the bypass. “You should see his kid.”

“Yeah?” There’s a smile in Conner’s voice. “How old is he?”

“Must be five, by my calculations. He’s the spitting image of Ty.”

“So, is she staying? Beth?”

“Don’t think so. She wants the place to be ready to sell by spring. I assume she’s going back to Arizona. There isn’t anything here for her. Except memories.”

“Sounds like you’re determined to take it on.”

“Signed on the dotted line and collected a deposit.”

“So, you need some help with it?”

Pushing a hand through his hair, Luke looks at his dad. The sincerity in his eyes is evident. “And have Mom skin me alive? No thank you.”

“I’m not an invalid, you know.”

“Maybe not, but one heart attack is one too many. Besides, you’re scheduled to leave for that cruise next week, aren’t you?”

He scowls. “*Not* my idea of an adventurous vacation. Cruising’s for old people.”

“Yeah? I don’t think you’re going to get Mom to climb Kilimanjaro”

“I’d settle for Mount Hood.”

“Well, when you get back from your cruise, *if* you can get Mom to let you off restriction, I might take you up on that offer of help. Unless something drastically changes, I’m going to have to let Jason go tomorrow. It’s going to leave me short.”

“Still drinking?”

“What he does on his time is his business, but when he shows up hung over, it becomes mine.”

“I hear ya. It’s too bad, though. He’s got a family to raise.”

Luke stands and stretches. “Some people just don’t see what’s right in front of them.”

Like Tyler.

“I’m going in to say my goodbyes.”

“No doubt, your mom has leftovers packed and ready for you to take home.”

“I’m counting on it.” He reaches for the doorknob when his dad’s voice stops him.

“Son?”

Luke turns back. “Yeah?”

“Promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

“Guard your heart.”

Luke nods once and heads inside.

LUKE

“What’d you think?” Luke asks Dave, his friend and foreman. They’re standing in what would have been called the parlor or sitting room, back in the day, while Miter slumbers in an empty corner. “Think we can have ‘er done by April?”

Dave scratches his shaven head and grimaces. “I don’t get it.”

“What?”

“We had, like, three jobs lined up. Who’s the prominent citizen who trumped all those?”

“What difference does it make? Just so happens this one came up, and I thought it would be a better use of our time.”

“Since when?” Dave challenges. “I know you better than that. You *like* diversity. Nothing gets you psyched like shuffling job sites. Besides, you don’t even like restoration. Always say it’s more work than it’s worth.”

Luke makes a point of checking his watch. “Hard to run three jobs a man short. Jason’s late again. Third strike and all that.”

“You didn’t know you’d be letting him go when you took on this mausoleum. So, fess up.”

No point in deflecting. Dave’ll know the truth soon enough. “You know who this *mausoleum* belonged to?”

He shrugs. “The Widow Wadkins. Can’t remember her first name. Died about two months ago. So? The place’s been empty for like twenty years.”

“Her granddaughter inherited it. Plans on fixing it up to sell.”

“Okay.” He draws out the word, like he’s waiting for the rest.

“*Emma* Wadkins was Beth Hanson’s grandmother.”

Dave’s eyebrows shoot up and he forms a silent “ooh” with his mouth. “How in the heck—”

“Doesn’t matter.” Luke turns away and crosses the room, his work boots scuffling on the hardwood, the sound echoing in the emptiness. “I agreed to take it on and—”

“Sounds like penance to me,” Dave mutters.

“Maybe it is.”

“So how’d she take it? Beth I mean?”

“About how you’d expect.”

“Why is it everyone in our circle knows the truth and no one clued Beth in?”

“Sometimes it’s just easier that way.” He throws a hand up. “Let’s stop the squawking and get down to business.” Best way to get Dave off his back is to keep him busy. “I need you to check out the plumbing and as much of the wiring as you can see without knocking holes in the walls. We have to get a game plan together.”

“What’s our budget?”

“Find out soon as I can sit down with Beth.”

Dave plants his hands on his hips. “Man, you’re a glutton for punishment.”

Luke runs his hand across his hair and wishes he could be anywhere but here. “It’ll be fine. She’ll get bored with the project soon enough. Maybe even decide to go back to Arizona once we get started. Not like she can do anything here.”

“You’re dreaming. How’re you gonna do a restoration without her input? There’s like a million decisions that’ll need to be made.”

“That’s what cell phones and email are for.”

Dave rubs his chin. “What I don’t get is why’d she even let you bid for this job.”

“Michelle.” No more explanation necessary.

“Huh. Well, this ought to be interesting. So, how’s she look?”

“Mind if we skip the chit chat and get to work, Sally?”

“That good, huh?”

“She looks good and mad, if you must know.” Luke sighs. “I don’t know what I’m doin’ here.”

“Penance, like I said. You do realize Tyler’s choices had nothin’ to do with you.”

“I know.”

“Maybe someone ought to clue his wife in.”

Luke pins Dave with a warning glare. “Not your business. You got that?”

Dave throws his hands up, like he’s blocking Luke’s ire. “Got it, boss. Just lookin’ out for you.”

“Much as I appreciate it, I got it covered.”

Or better yet, God’s got it covered.



Beth

BETH DRIVES DOWN MAIN STREET, grateful the B & B has parking in back. There’s not an empty space within two blocks of the Victorian. Why are so many people out this early? Most of the shops aren’t even open yet. She turns down a narrow side street, then down the alley to the gravel parking area and pulls in next to Luke’s truck. Another is also parked. Crewmen already?

“Lovely,” she mutters.

“Ya think Miter’s here?” T.J. yells from behind Beth, unhooking his car seat with more efficiency than Beth could manage.

“I wouldn’t be surprised, bud.” But her words are lost as he slams the car door.

Beth gathers her purse and iPad and follows at a more leisurely pace. Day one of ninety, by her count. Ninety very long, stress-filled

days. And that's not even taking into account the actual remodel stress. Just dealing with Luke... one day at a time.

She hears T.J.'s exuberant chatter through the open kitchen door, as she peruses the yard. It's a little winter weary, but the flagstone patio is in good shape and the mature trees appear to be healthy. Whoever buys this place will have a sweet area for outdoor seating. A few wrought iron tables with umbrellas and they'll be set for breakfast outside.

"Can I take Miter for a walk?" T.J. stands in the open doorway. His coat is already off, no doubt lying on the kitchen floor, and his cheeks are red from the cold.

"Not by yourself, you can't," she protests, climbing the few brick steps to reach him. "You're too young to be traipsing down Main Street on your own."

"I tried to tell him that," Luke calls from somewhere within.

Beth brushes back a wisp of T.J.'s hair and cups his cheek. "Give Mr. Luke and me a little time to go over things and, if you're patient, I'll take you to the park for a little while after." It doesn't matter the season, T.J.'s always up for playing in the park.

"Miter, too?"

"Only if Mr. Luke says it's okay. Meanwhile, you can play with Miter in the back. Just don't leave the yard. And put your coat on."

Once T.J. and Miter are occupied outside, Beth plops her things on the dated kitchen counter—gray and white metal-edged formica. A deep breath, and she prepares herself for the next emotional onslaught. If she can pretend Luke is just any other contractor, maybe she can set personal issues aside. For the better good.

It's almost as cold inside as out, and hugging her jacket across her chest, she walks through the dining room in search of Luke. The insulation must not be very efficient. *If* the old place was insulated at all. She finds Luke inspecting the window trim in the parlor, tape measure in one hand. He's wearing faded Levi's and a flannel shirt. Could he be more cliché?

She musters an even tone. "How long have you been here?"

A quick glance at her, then his focus is back on the window. "A

couple hours. I wanted to scope things out before you came.” He turns to her. “You ready to talk turkey?”

Her lips twitch. “About a month late for that.”

He shrugs and a smile tugs at his mouth. “Did you have a nice New Year?”

She nods but is hesitant to ask about his. It might be best to keep things on a professional level. Then again, she’s not heartless. “Michelle told me about your dad’s heart attack. Last year, wasn’t it?”

“Yep.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Chomping at the bit to do something more adventurous than a Caribbean cruise.”

“Well, that’s a good sign, I suppose.”

He clips the tape measure on his belt and gathers up a yellow legal pad. “I’ve been making notes about what I think needs to be done. But a lot of it will depend on your budget. Dave, my foreman... you remember Dave Reynolds, don’t you?”

For a brief moment, she’s taken aback by his quick change of subject. But then, wasn’t she just thinking it would be best to stick to business? “Uh, yeah. I didn’t know he was working for you.”

“Going on four years now. Anyway, he’s upstairs checking out the plumbing and wiring.”

“You couldn’t possibly have a cost breakdown already.”

“Nothing specific, but some generalities. Let’s take the windows, for example.”

She glances at the window next to him. “What’s wrong with them?”

“They’re single pane, for one thing. But you have twelve windows on this floor alone. Then upstairs, two windows in each bedroom, one in each of the four bathrooms...” He looks up at the ceiling, as if he has x-ray vision and can see the second floor rooms. “We can retrofit the windows, which will be considerably less expense than replacing them. Then, just a little sanding and refinishing of the trim, and we’re good to go.”

“Can’t we leave them as is? I mean, I’m just going to sell the place anyway.”

“Maybe we should start by looking at your budget. If you can afford to retrofit, I’d do that. You’ll get a better price for the place if it’s energy efficient.”

It’s hard to argue with logic “That makes sense.”

“Mommy!” T.J.’s voice echoes from upstairs. When did he get up there?

“In here, bud.” Footsteps clatter down the stairs and he stumbles into the parlor, Miter at his heels. “There’s a man up there.”

“That’s Mr. Reynolds. He works for Mr. Luke.”

“Oh. Well, he said he knew my daddy. Is that true?”

Beth nods. “I suppose it is. What were you doing up there?”

“Just lookin’. This place is so cool. Can we live here?”

“No, sweetie. We’re going to sell it, remember?”

“So we’re going to live with Auntie Shell and Uncle Paul forever?”

“Of course not. We’re going to go back to Arizona to be with Grandma and Grandpop.”

He scowls. “I’d rather stay here ’til we go back to Zona.”

Who could blame him?

Luke ruffles T.J.’s hair as if it’s second nature. “Don’t you like it at your Aunt Shell’s?”

“It’s okay. But me and Mommy hafta share a bedroom. There’s like a gazillion rooms here, and I can have my own.”

And the idea is formed. “Why not?” Beth blurts.

“What’d you mean?” Luke looks at her like she’s grown two heads.

“Move in here.” Beth turns in a circle, scanning the room. Not much furniture, but it would be so much more convenient.

“Yay! I’m gonna pick my bedroom.” T.J. and Miter scamper back up the stairs.

“You’ve gotta be kidding.” Luke’s protest seems out of line. “You going to sleep on pallets? And what about heating this place? I thought you were on a budget.”

“What’s got you so worked up?” Beth doesn’t wait for an answer.

“We won’t be in your way. And it’s more convenient for me. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before.”

“Maybe because it’s a stupid idea,” Luke mutters.

Yes, moving in would make things much easier. And irritating Luke is just icing on the cake.

BETH

Beth lays the suitcases open on the queen bed in Michelle's guest room. Weak, late-afternoon sun bathes the small space in shadows. Starting with the top drawer, she transfers the stacks of folded clothes and takes care to use every available crevice. Socks tucked into shoes, just like Mom taught her. Pants and shirts rolled into tight tubes to alleviate wrinkles. Not that she'll be traveling far—less than two miles.

Is moving into the B & B the right decision or did she make it out of spite? Just an opportunity to make Luke's life a little uncomfortable? And what does *he* care where she lives, anyway? It's not like he'll be living there with her.

"There you are. T.J. said you're packing, but I didn't believe it."

Michelle's voice breaks into the mire of Beth's thoughts, startling a yelp from her. "You shouldn't sneak up on a person like that, Shell. You just took ten years off my life."

"Sneak?" Michelle looks down at her own full-figured body. "I've never been exactly *stealth*. You're just in your own little world. So, what's all this?" She picks up a sweater from the bed and holds it up for explanation.

“Just what T.J. said. I’m packing. We’re going to move into Grandma’s house.”

“But why?” The pitch of her voice escalates as her face falls. “Is it something I said?”

Beth can’t help but laugh at Michelle’s distraught expression. “No, silly. It just makes sense. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. Why crowd you and Paul when I have a perfectly good house to live in?”

“Perfectly good?” She rolls her eyes. “If it’s *‘perfectly good’* then why’re you spending a small fortune to restore it?”

“You know what I mean.” Beth pulls another stack from the drawer.

“What about furniture? Is there even a bed for you guys to sleep on?”

“Of course. It’s not completely empty.”

“It’s cold and drafty.”

Beth focuses on forming a pair of T.J.’s jeans into a minute roll. “It’ll be fine. I won’t have to get T.J. up at oh-so-dark-thirty to beat Luke there.”

“You do realize Luke is capable of working on the project without you standing over him.” She plops onto a narrow space left on the bed.

“As if. You really think I *want* to be there with him?”

“You tell me.”

With a scowl, Beth asks, “Why’re you home from work so early, anyway?”

“Nausea. Morning sickness isn’t relegated to mornings. Besides, the office was pretty quiet. Paul can manage on his own.”

“Lucky you have such an understanding boss.”

“He’s going to have to be a lot more understanding once baby bean here is born.” She pats her belly. “I’m not so sure a CPA’s office is any place to raise a child.”

“You’ll figure it out.” Another roll gets tucked into the case. “Meanwhile, with us out of your hair, you can start working on the nursery.”

“There’s no hurry. We’re not due until July. If you have your way, you’ll be long gone by then.”

Here we go again. “What choice do I have, Shell?”

“You can work anywhere. It’s not like you have some highfalutin job in Arizona. You’ve been *waitressing* for crying out loud. Besides, you should be cooking, not waitressing. You can open up your own bakery.”

“Yeah, me and Mrs. Fields. What would I use for money? Haven’t we *just* been down this road?”

“Okay, you want to continue as a waitress, we have a variety of choices. Steakhouse? Right down the street. Italian? Less than a mile away. Then there’s—”

“Stop!” Beth huffs and tosses a shirt on the bed. “I want T.J. to go to a private Christian school, and I can’t afford that here. The cost of living is higher for everything.”

Michelle fingers a blouse lying on the bed. “We went to public school, and we turned out just fine. And yes, the cost of living is higher, but so are the wages.”

“Michelle.” Beth pushes aside a stack of clothes and sits down. She reaches across an open suitcase and takes her friend’s hand. “You know how hard it is for me here. The memories of Tyler...”

“I know you miss him, but people lose spouses all the time and don’t move to another state.”

“And then there’s my parents. They’ve been a Godsend.”

“I can be a Godsend.”

“It’s not just that.” She envisions Luke’s smug face. How can she ever forgive him if she has to see him all the time?

“Luke?” Michelle asks, as if reading her mind.

Beth nods.

“Have you ever considered that you’re wrong about him?”

“What do you mean?”

Michelle pulls her hand from Beth’s and shakes her head. “Nothing. It’s just, you’ve held onto this grudge for far too long. I loved my brother every bit as you—”

“It’s not the same.”

“Granted. But I would hope if anything happens to Paul, I won’t be steeped in grief so long, I fail to see the blessings right in front of my face. Tyler wouldn’t want you mooning over him forever. He’d want you to live.”

“I *am* living, Shell. I’m just not living *here*.”

“Really?” She arches a brow. “So, how many dates have you had in the last year?”

Beth glares at her. “That proves nothing.”

“Maybe it does. Maybe it doesn’t. But this time here is an opportunity. *Talk* to Luke. He’s a good guy. No, he’s a *great* guy, and you’re holding onto a grudge that hurts you far more than it does him. Haven’t you heard that saying about taking poison?”

“What?” Beth laughs. “You getting pregnancy brain already?”

“Very funny. You know the saying. A man who refuses to forgive is like drinking poison expecting the other person to die.”



Luke

LUKE ZIPS his down vest and picks up the pace. Miter, whose fur coat insulates him no matter the temperature, runs ahead, his nose to the ground. Crazy to be out tramping through the mountains after dark, but only a heart-pounding hike will exhaust him to the point of oblivion. Exorcise Tyler’s ghost.

And his widow.

He slips the headlamp over his beanie and powers it on. Shadows dance, and for a moment, he loses sight of Miter. A quick whistle brings the dog back into view.

“Stay close, buddy, or you might end up in the bottom of a mine shaft.”

Miter whines as if he understands, and heals beside Luke.

“Can you believe her gall?” He asks the dog. “Move into the B & B,” he growls then glances at the sky to address God. “It’s not enough,

Lord, that I agreed to take on this job in the first place? Only so much a man can take.”

But God's silent on the matter.

“Am I supposed to be her punching bag? You can't expect me to tell her the truth?” He asks incredulously. “First off, she won't believe me. Second, it'll only cause her pain. Or *more* pain. Isn't it better that she believes I influenced Tyler to re-up? It's not like we can change the outcome. Even You haven't been known to resurrect a body after five years.”

Luke cringes at his own words. Might be the he went a bit far with that observation. But for crying out loud. Just when he's getting his life on an even keel, *she* has to show up, with her ice-blue eyes and delicate features. One minute he wants to protect her, the next he wants to dunk her in a pool of snow melt.

Rounding a corner, Luke breaks out of the thick forest of pine and oak, and his breath catches at the sight. A harvest moon suspended at eye level, seemingly close enough to touch, floods the path in light. Bright light. And Luke's reminded of a bible verse. Matthew four-something. *The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.*

“Okay, Lord. But what does it mean for *my* situation?”

No answer, but that doesn't surprise Luke. Wisdom is only given to those who search for it.

LUKE

Ehoco-Latte does a steady stream of business, which is one reason Luke's grateful for the back room. The simple curtain doesn't afford much privacy, but it keeps the distractions to a minimum.

"Any more prayer requests, guys?" He checks his watch. "We have a few more minutes."

The five other guys sitting around the table glance at each other with expectation. Although divergent in age, from mid-twenties to late fifties, they're bonded by their desire to live godly lives. Three of them, Tom, Craig and Michael, are part of the original group Luke started meeting with weekly over three years before. George, the oldest at fifty-eight, joined up six months prior. Then there's Bruce—a month under his belt and still hesitant to speak. Might be he's intimidated by the older men. In Luke's experience, there weren't many mid-twenty guys willing to take precious time from their families to meet with a bunch of men. Especially at six in the morning.

Tom closes his bible and scratches his graying goatee. "Want me to close in prayer?" He glances around the table before resting his elbows on the table. Eyes closed, he prays. "Heavenly Father, we are grateful for the work You do in our lives. We humbly ask that You

watch over each one of us as we go about our day today. We lift each of the requests to You, Lord, and pray Your will be done. In Your Son's name."

Amens are mumbled all around.

"We'll see you guys next week," Luke says. "And as usual, don't hesitate to call one of us if you have any issues before then." He stands as the others gather their belongings.

Everyone except Bruce.

Luke makes his way to the other side of the table and leans over the younger man. "You okay?"

Bruce glances at the other men and fidgets. Waiting for them to be out of earshot, is Luke's guess. "You have a minute?" he mumbles.

"Sure." He waves the last guy off and sits next to Bruce. "What's up?"

Bruce shrugs. "Me and Mandy, well, we've been arguing about something lately. Only way I could get her to drop it is I promised to bring it up in Bible study."

Luke nods. Might've been good if Bruce *did* share it with the group instead of just him. His experience with women could fit on the end of a ten penny nail. "Okay. Shoot."

Bruce fidgets again, rubs at his chin and readjusts his butt in the chair. "This job opportunity's come up and I really think I should take it."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Well, you know how hard it's been finding decent work." Bruce made more than a few mistakes before he found Jesus. Employers aren't too keen on hiring a young guy with a past. "The only problem is, it's down south and not really a fit place to raise a kid."

"It take it, Mandy's not on board."

"Thinks I should pass it up." He shrugs. "I kind of get it. I mean, the friend who found me the job isn't exactly a good influence, if you know what I mean."

"This the kid who you were hanging out with when you got busted a few years ago?"

“Yeah.” Bruce looks down and shakes his head. “But man, it’s not like decent paying jobs come along every day, and you’ve all been praying I find work. Well, this is work.”

“If you take this job, are you plan on moving Mandy and the baby down there?”

“No way.” His eyes flick to Luke and back down again. “I’d have to stay there during the week and come home on weekends. That’s the other issue she has.”

Luke nods. “I’m afraid I have to agree with Mandy on this, Bruce. Your friend, has he turned his life around like you have?”

He snorts. “Doubtful.”

“There’s a verse in Proverbs 30 that says, ‘Walk with the wise and become wise; associate with fools and get in trouble.’” He should know, he’d played the part of the fool in his younger days. Probably why it’s so easy for Beth to believe the worst.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been there, done that.”

“Your first commitment is to the Lord.”

“Well, sure.”

“After that, the most important commitment you have is to your wife. You made her a promise to cherish her, right?”

“Can’t do that too good if I can’t afford to pay for food and rent.”

“I hear you. But if you walk by faith, are righteous in God’s eyes, the rest will take care of itself.”

Bruce nods. “I guess I’ll just keep plugging along taking the odd jobs. Had me a decent one when Mandy and I got married. But the company went under and I haven’t been able to find anything since.”

Luke taps a finger on the table. Bruce reminds him some of Tyler. He’d had some of the same struggles. Watching Bruce over the course of the last month wasn’t enough time to be sure of his commitment to the Lord, but then that’s where faith comes in. “I have a proposition for you.”

Bruce sits up straighter, his gaze narrowing on Luke. “What’s that?”

“If you’re willing to start at the bottom and work hard, I’d be willing to give you a chance on my crew.”

“Crew?” His brows furrow. “What *kind* of crew?”

Luke’s taken aback. He just assumed Bruce knew he owned Kingsford Construction. But then again, why should he? Luke never talked about the job at bible study and being a newbie at church, Bruce hadn’t made a lot of connections. “Construction.”

“You’re in construction?” Then his eyes widen and it’s like a lightbulb goes off in his brain. “You’re *that* Kingsford?”

“Kind of surprised you haven’t come looking for a job.”

His face falls. “I don’t have any experience with construction.”

“Which is the reason you’d start at the bottom and work real hard. Right?”

Bruce smiles. “Right. Man, I can’t thank you enough. When do I start?”

“How does today sound?”



Beth

BETH ZIPS T.J. into his coat with a shake of her head. “You know, one of the reasons I agreed to move in here was so I didn’t have to get you up so early.”

T.J. looks up at her, his head cocked. “I was too ‘cited to sleep. Besides, it was too cold.”

“I hear you, kiddo.” With a grimace, Beth dons her own coat as they move through the front door. No way she’ll to admit to Luke he might be right about the heat issue. “We’ll just pop across the street and get you a hot chocolate. That ought to warm you up. And Mama’s in desperate need of coffee.”

Choco-Latte, one block down from the B & B, is the only place open within walking distance, and Beth’s grateful for the convenience. Main Street is still decked out with Christmas decorations—greenery and red bows on every post, with more greenery and bows arcing across the old highway every twenty feet or so.

When Beth and T.J. enter the coffee shop, she’s surprised by the

activity so early in the morning. There are people gathered in twos and threes at small tables, both around the perimeter and in the two windows overlooking the street, as well as a queue waiting to be served. Understandable, with the inviting aromas wafting through the air. Coffee, baked goods, and something fruity she can't identify.

Once in line, T.J. by her side, Beth glances around the cozy shop. It wasn't in existence on her previous visit to Sutter Creek, but it certainly found its niche. Backroads, down the street, has more of a breakfast crowd and the closest Starbucks is more than two miles away.

A quaint shop for a quaint town.

Beth tugs T.J. behind her as she moves to the front of the line. "Good morning," she says to the young woman manning the register. "You guys sure do a great business here."

"That we do."

"I'm Beth and this is my son, T.J."

She flashes T.J. a warm smile. "Hey, T.J. I'm Amanda. What can I get for you?"

"Do you got hot chocolate?"

"We certainly do. The best in Amador County."

"Yay. That's what I want."

"You got it." She then focuses on Beth. "And what can I offer you? Not only do we have coffee, but we have a generous variety of teas." She points to a coffee table behind Beth, where clear, old-fashioned, canisters with colorful tea leaves line three narrow shelves.

"That's tempting, but I really need a strong cup of coffee."

"I totally understand. For here or to go?"

"To go."

She fills a to-go cup with coffee and hands it to Beth. "Sugar, cream and lids are on the coffee table. We make the hot chocolate from scratch, so it'll be a couple minutes. In the meantime, you're welcome to check out the teas for next time."

Beth pays for their purchase and leads T.J. to the coffee table. She adds a generous amount of cream to her coffee and snaps on a lid. Her eyes are drawn to the small canisters, each labeled with the tea

flavor: wild berry, bourbon vanilla rooibos, cinnamon apricot, hibiscus, Moroccan mint and on and on. Beth takes the wild berry from the shelf, pops open the spring-loaded clasp and inhales the exotic fruity aroma. No wonder the shop smells so delightful.

“What’s back there, Mommy?”

Beth replaces the canister and looks to see where T.J.’s pointing. A curtain separates the front of the shop from the back. “Looks like more tables, sweetie.”

“Can we go look?”

A group of men step through the curtain and Beth catches a glimpse of a round table with two occupants—one of them, Luke. Work meeting, maybe? Whatever it is, it’s none of her business. Even so, she leans closer and overhears the younger man lamenting about his lack of success at finding a job.

“Can we, Mommy?”

“Not this time, sweetie.”

“Here’s your hot chocolate.” Amanda waves T.J. to a nearby table and sets his cup of chocolate on it. She looks at Beth. “It’s hot, so you might want to give it a few minutes.”

Beth helps T.J. out of his coat and hangs it on the back of his chair. “We’ll just hang out here for a few.” She’s talking to T.J., but her focus is on the curtain. She doesn’t care what Luke does with his time, but it certainly seems like he’s counseling the young man. What was it Shell said about him? ‘He’s a good man. No, he’s a *great* man.’

Beth takes the lid from T.J.’s chocolate. “We’re going to let it cool for a few minutes.” She hands him her phone. “Why don’t you play with the reading app while I check out the teas?”

T.J. shrugs. “Okay.”

Beth steps up to the coffee table and snatches up a jar of tea. Flipping the lid open, she makes a show of inhaling, but sidles closer to the back room. With the curtain between her and Luke, she cocks her head, as if it will make the conversation clearer over the hub of other patrons.

“Your first commitment is to the Lord,” Luke says.

“Well, sure.”

“After that, the most important commitment you have is to your wife. You made her a promise to cherish her, right?”

Did she hear him correctly?

She steps away from the curtain and, her mind puzzling over what Luke said, almost drops the canister of tea. Heart thumping, she locks the top in place and slides the tea onto the shelf with care. Why couldn't he have counseled Tyler to cherish his marriage instead of talking him into re-upping for a second tour? Had he done so, her husband would still be alive. And T.J. would have a father.

Cheeks hot, she returns to T.J. “It's time to go, sweetie.” She snaps the lid back on his chocolate and helps him into his coat.

“Is Mr. Luke and Miter coming today?”

“Yes.” And will *he* ever have some explaining to do.

BETH

*I*t takes only one night at the B & B for Beth to regret the impulsive move. What was she *thinking*? Not only are she and T.J. freezing, there is no escape if she wants to avoid Luke. Not just Luke, but the noise and chaos created in the midst of a remodel. The only benefit is that it makes her mind too fuzzy to replay the little tete-de-tete she heard a few hours ago in the coffee shop.

She grits her teeth as the ear-piercing whine of the table saw set up out back fills the kitchen. Just another reason to give into Luke's insistence that the single-pane windows be replaced by dual-pane. Beth could hide away in her sparse, drafty bedroom, but that would be a colossal waste of time. Instead, she scowls at Dave Reynolds through the yellowed kitchen curtains and continues inventory of the cupboards. A task she should've undertaken *before* deciding to move in.

Grandma left behind five different sets of dishes, by Beth's count. None of them complete, and what's left, chipped or cracked. She'd donate the whole lot to the thrift store, but they also need to have something to eat on and cook in while living in the house.

T.J., Miter in tow, appears in the kitchen, both looking a little

exhausted from their romp in the parlor. "Can me and Miter have a cookie?"

"You mean *'May Miter and I have a cookie?'*"

He scrunches up his nose. "You wanna cookie, too, Mommy?"

Beth laughs. "No sweetie. You may have a cookie, but I don't think it would be a good idea for Miter to have one. You can run upstairs and ask Mr. Luke if he has any dog treats for him."

"Okay." He turns and clatters through the house and up the stairs.

Beth unloads two more shelves of chipped dishes from the cupboard and sets them on the kitchen table. That's all she can do without climbing. No chair or stool in sight, she clammers up, knees on the counter and hands within easy reach of the top two shelves.

"What're you doing?" Luke yells above the din of the table saw.

Luke's voice scares a yelp from her and she scrambles to latch onto the cabinet door to maintain her balance. "You should announce yourself," she yells back. The noise blessedly stops just then.

"Don't think you'd of heard me if I blew an airhorn. Let me help you down from there."

"I'm fine." She swats his hands away as he reaches for her and hops down with all the grace of a rhino in a rose garden. Lack of privacy and constant noise has her on edge. Not that she needs a reason with Luke around.

"I can get you a step stool. It's not safe, you climbing up on the counter that way."

Dave pokes his head in the kitchen door. "Heading over to Backroads for a sandwich. You want anything?"

"No thanks," Luke says. "I brought my lunch." He looks at Beth. "You?"

She shakes her head, then tacks on a "No Thank you."

"Hey Dave," Luke stops his exit. "Bruce is upstairs taking window measurements. Maybe see if he wants anything. Tell him I'm buying."

Dave cracks a grin. "Sure. You buyin' for me, too?"

Luke snorts. "As if I can afford your feed bill."

“Looks like we got us a new teacher’s pet,” Dave jokes as he passes through the kitchen.

Beth crosses her arms and stares at her shoes, waiting for Luke’s exit. When he doesn’t move, she glances up. He’s just standing there, in the middle of the room, watching her. “Is there something you need?”

He rests his hip on the kitchen table. “Came down for Miter’s dog biscuits.”

“And?” Beth draws the word out.

He crosses his arms, mirroring her stance, and stares her down. “*And*, I want to know what’s got you so... miffed this morning.”

“*Miffed*?” That’s not a word a man uses every day.

“Yeah. Beyond your usual sunny disposition.”

She ignores his sarcasm. “Confused is more like it.”

“Confused?” His brow furrows. “Confused about what? I thought we got the details of the project ironed out the other day. We agreed—”

“Not about the work here.” She draws in a deep breath, not sure if she’s willing to jump into this conversation yet. Spontaneous decisions haven’t exactly served her well in the past.

“Then what?”

“I—”

“Didja get Miter’s biscuit?” T.J.’s voice precedes him into the kitchen, then boy and dog make an appearance. “I didn’t get mine yet.”

Beth is grateful for the interruption. “Actually, T.J., it’s lunch time. Why don’t I make you a sandwich and you can have a cookie after?”

“Do we got peanut butter?”

“Of course we do. I bought some bananas, too.”

“Okay.” He turns to Luke. “Can Miter eat lunch with me?”

“Sure. I’ll give you a couple biscuits for him. Just don’t give him any of your food, okay?”

“Kay. I’m gonna go wash my hands.” Boy and dog disappear.

“Now back to what we were discussing,” Luke says.

Beth rubs her forehead. “Forget it.” She’s so tired of fighting. So tired of being angry.

He sighs. “I don’t want to forget it. It’s obvious I’m not your favorite person, and I don’t expect that’ll change. But we have to at least have a decent working relationship if this projects going to be a success.”

Beth couldn’t disagree. “I need more than the two minutes it’ll take T.J. to wash up. I don’t want to get in the middle of this only to be interrupted again.”

“I get it. What do you suggest?”

She shrugs.

“How about I come over tonight after T.J.’s in bed? Either that, or I can be here before he gets up tomorrow.”

“That won’t work. He was up at five this morning. Tonight’ll be fine. He’s in bed by 7:30.”

Luke nods once. “I’ll be here at 8:00.”



Beth

BREATH short and her heart nearly beating out of her chest, Beth takes the stairs to the second floor two at a time. T.J. wasn’t anywhere to be found on the property or the first floor, and neither was Miter. What kind of a mother loses her child? Did T.J. wander off on his own or is he hiding in one of the endless niches in the drafty old house?

With heavy footsteps, she starts the search with his bedroom and covers her heart with a shaky hand. There he is, curled up on his bed, fast asleep—even with enough construction noise to raise the dead. Miter, on guard duty, lies at T.J.’s feet. His golden head pops up and his brown eyes seem to plead with Beth to not awaken his charge. As if she could.

“Good dog,” she whispers, backing out of the room. She can’t

remember the last time her son took a nap. Even a five-year-old can take only so much excitement.

Now what? She'd given Luke the go ahead to retrofit the windows and they started on the process on the first floor, which makes her more than a little suspicious. How is it he has the materials at the ready if he didn't already have them? Regardless, she doesn't want to be in the way, and hanging out in her cloister-like bedroom holds no appeal. Maybe it's time to do a little exploring of her own.

After opening two doors to find minuscule closets, she hits pay dirt on the third—one she's passed every day in the hallway between the parlor and dining room. If she'd been thinking clearly, she'd have known it was the basement door by the slide-lock that sits at eye-level. She knew the basement existed, but can't remember ever seeing it.

She flicks the lock and peers into the darkness. A string hangs just to the left, and she gives it a tug, bathing the steep wood stairs with enough light to navigate her decent. Once at the bottom, she finds a switch. Florescent light flickers for a moment, accompanied by a distinct hum, then floods the basement.

Beth's eyes take in a virtual treasure. Even crammed as the pieces are, it's evident that this is where all Grandma's furniture has gone. Not sold off, as Beth assumed. Stored. She squeezes between a marble-topped dry sink and sleigh-style headboard and flicks the cover off of what could be a loveseat. Aha. She's right. Dark burgundy velvet framed by rich, ornate wood. She tests the firmness of the seat with a hand before sinking into it and visualizes where it sat in Grandma's parlor. A divan. That's what her grandma called it.

Eyes closed, she breathes in dust, mold and memories. Her grandma would talk about this old place like it was a cherished family member. After her grandpa died, her grandma didn't have the heart or energy to keep it running. How many years ago was that? At least twenty. And now, thanks to an inheritance, her grandma's dream will be revived.

Dreams.

Beth swallows a sudden lump. How long has it been since *she's*

dreamed? Is Michelle right? Did she stop living when Tyler died? Not all the different from her grandma. How many years is Beth going to merely exist? What kind of legacy will that give T.J.?

A shiver runs up Beth's spine. She hugs herself and runs her hands up and down her arms to generate some heat.

"What do you think, Lord?" she whispers. The question is tentative, as it's been a long time since she really cared what God thought. Her relationship with Him died along with her dreams, along with her husband.

"Am I just giving lip service, Lord, when I try to teach T.J. about Jesus? Am I one of those arrogant hypocrites He despises?" The mere thought of it brings a sting of tears to Beth's eyes. "Oh, Lord," she breathes. "I think I am." Her voice breaks and shame fills her heart. "Please forgive me." She's reminded of a verse in Matthew that plagued her in Sunday school.

Shifting on the divan, she retrieves her phone from her back pocket, opens up the rarely-used bible app, and thumbs the words *verse in Matthew forgiving others before God will forgive you* in the search bar. A few seconds later, Matthew 6:14-15 pops up. *For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

Another chill runs up Beth's spine, but she doubts it's from the cold. How often has she sinned and taken for granted that she'd be forgiven? Yet, she's allowed her anger with God to disable her relationship with Him. And she's allowed her anger at Luke to turn her into a ... a ... shrew.

"I forgive him, Lord," she whispers to the rafters. "I forgive Luke. I know he's not to blame for Tyler's decision. Even if he *did* influence him." A twinge of conviction has Beth sighing. Maybe this whole forgiveness thing'll take a little more time to get right. "I'm so sorry I've been pig-headed and hard hearted. Please forgive me."

She wipes a tear from her cheek and blows out a cleansing breath. "I need to dream again. Not just for me, but for T.J., as well."

Her eyes catch the marble-topped dry sink she'd squeezed past to reach the divan. She can start with one piece.

Standing, she slips her phone back into the rear pocket of her jeans and moves to the dry sink. She runs a hand across the inlaid wood and then atop the smooth, cold marble. It appears to be in perfect shape. She doesn't remember where her grandma originally had the piece, but she can picture it in the foyer, topped with a vase of fresh flowers.

It's not much of a dream, but it's a start.

LUKE

Luke parks his truck in front of the B & B and turns off the engine. The porch light is on as well as one glowing through the window in the front room. Why he agreed to this meeting, he didn't know. Did he really expect that Beth would have an open mind about *anything* he said?

He rubs his face with both hands and blows out a breath. "Okay, Lord," he whispers. "You know her heart and her hurts. Please give me the words to begin reconciliation. I don't know how to reach her, but You do."

The front porch light bathes the large wrap-around deck in a soft glow. The gray-painted planks are in good shape, and with a little elbow grease and some decent wicker furniture, it'd be the perfect spot for guests to relax and people watch. If it weren't so cold out, Luke'd suggest that he and Beth sit on the steps rather than be hemmed inside where there just might not be enough room for both him and her emotions.

Beth answers Luke's soft knock and opens the door wide for him to enter. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself," he says, stepping into the foyer. His eyes skip over her, lest they linger too long, and latch onto an antique dry sink set

against the far wall. A vase of bright blooms sits in the center of the marble top, giving the otherwise stark area a little life. "You've been busy."

Beth follows his gaze and smiles. "I found that in the basement. There are quite a few treasures down there, actually. I assumed Grandma sold off most of her antiques, so imagine my surprise with the discovery."

Luke is encouraged by Beth's less-than-hostile welcome. Maybe this evening won't be a colossal waste of time, after all.

"Would you like some coffee or tea?"

It takes a moment for Luke to react to the question. Two for two. His eyes meet hers for a moment, gauging any hidden agenda on her part, but he can't detect anything beyond a polite smile. "Whatever you're having is fine with me."

"Peppermint tea it is."

Luke cringes. Shouldn't have been so accommodating.

Beth chuckles. "Coffee? Black tea?"

"Anything but peppermint."

"Let's sit in the kitchen. I have a space heater in there, so it's a little warmer."

Luke follows her through the foyer and parlor, down the long hallway, through the dining room and, finally, into the kitchen. He can't help but notice her slim hips encased in faded jeans and the way her long, dark hair sways mid-way down her back. Maybe she's luring him into a trap. That's the only explanation for her uncharacteristic pleasant disposition. No matter, he's fairly confident he can take her if it comes down to it.

Beth pushes through the swinging door and the temperature rises by a good ten degrees. Mismatched cups sit on the scarred kitchen table, along with a plate of cookies, a couple napkins and a variety of tea boxes.

"Okay." Luke stands firm just inside the kitchen door and holds his hands up in surrender. "Who are you and what have you done with the surly Beth Hanson?"

"Very funny." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and rests

her hands on the back of a chair.

"I'm not kidding. What's going on? I thought you were angry with me."

Without answering, she moves to the ancient gas stove and flicks on a burner. After placing a kettle over the flame, she turns back to Luke. "I'm tired, Luke."

The admission halts his breath. "Seriously, are you okay?"

A dimple appears as she gives him a subtle smile. "I'm fine. Physically." She pulls out a chair and plops into it, pushing her hair off her face. "I did a lot of soul searching this afternoon while T.J. took a nap." She watches as he pulls his own chair out and sits across from her. "Just the fact that he even took a nap, which he hasn't done in over a *year*, was a bit of a wake-up call for me."

Luke's at a loss for words and, hesitant to let his guard down, says nothing. A verse in Proverbs pops into his head, *Even fools are thought wise when they keep silent.*

"So," she continues, "I realized after a lot of prayer, something I've done about as often as T.J. naps, that my exhaustion is from holding onto my anger. At you." She gives him a sad smile. "At God."

"What brought all this on?" Luke's question is interrupted by the whistle from the kettle. "Let me," he insists. As he fills the two mugs on the table with boiling water, steam rises, veiling Beth's features for a moment. He sends up a silent prayer of thanks for Beth's uncharacteristic openness as he returns the kettle to the stovetop.

Beth takes a teabag from a box and pushes a couple others toward Luke.

Without much thought, Luke reaches for a bag and drops it into his steaming mug. He couldn't care less about tea. He wants to know what's come over Beth. "Are you going to share how you came about this miraculous epiphany?"

Her snort is anything but lady-like. "*Miraculous?* Give me a break. I wasn't *that* bad, was I?"

"Pretty much."

She shifts in her seat, rests her elbows on the table and wraps her hands around her mug. "T.J. woke very early this morning, and as I'm

sure you know, I moved in here without much planning or forethought. I didn't even have *coffee* in the house." Her gaze flicks across the table at him, then back to her mug. "So, we went to Choco-Latte so I'd be functional by the time your crew arrived."

"I was there this morning, too."

Her gaze flicks to his for a moment. "I know. I saw you." She says it like he should have a clue where she's going with this conversation.

"I must've still been in the back room with the bible study group."

"Ah. Well, that makes sense. When I noticed you, you were just with that kid you introduced to me this morning."

Luke's eyes narrow. "You mean Bruce." What could he have to do with any of this?

"I overheard your conversation." Beth squirms as if she's been caught in a nefarious act.

"Overheard? With all the people in that place?"

She scrunches up her nose. "Okay, I was eavesdropping."

"*Eaves*—"

"Wait." She puts a hand up to halt his response. "Before you get all righteous on me, I admit it was wrong, okay? But it's that conversation that got me thinking."

Now Luke's curious. "How so?"

"You were telling Bruce that his first commitment is to God. And his second is to his marriage. At first it made me angry." She lowers her voice. "I mean, you talked Tyler into signing up for a second tour. Here we were, married less than a *year*, and I was pregnant with T.J." Tears pool in her eyes.

Anger he can handle. Tears are something altogether different. "But I didn't, Beth."

"Yes, you did."

"No," Luke says, his voice low and firm. Hurtful or not, it was time she knew the truth. "I tried to talk him *out* of a second tour."



Beth

BETH TAKES a deep breath and reins in her emotions. Here she just told Luke that the conversation she overheard awoke her to some wrong thinking, and now she's making accusations again. "I'm sorry." She throws a second *I'm sorry* up to God for good measure. She covers her face with both hands, warmed by the tea she'd been holding. "I don't want to go down this road again."

"I don't, either." Luke's voice is gentle, piercing her more deeply than if he'd shouted the words. "And I can see how hard you're trying to forgive me for something you've held against me for years. Had I done what you're accusing me of, I would be thrilled to accept your forgiveness. But I'm telling you that I did *not* talk Tyler into re-upping."

She drops her hands and beseeches Luke with her eyes. "He *said* you convinced him to take a second tour. If that's not true, then I don't understand why'd he tell me it was." Did her husband lie to her? Had she been cursing Luke all this time when he was innocent.

Luke slumped back in his chair. "The last thing I want to do is hurt you. Does it really matter *why* Tyler re-upped?"

Beth closes her eyes in an attempt to picture Tyler the way she last saw him. But his image has been slowly disintegrating as if time was erasing his existence. She opens her eyes and looks at Luke. He'd probably rather be anywhere than here right now.

"It matters to me," she whispers. "I've been holding onto this grudge with you for advising him to go, and I've been holding onto a grudge with God for taking him from me. How can I move on if I don't know the truth?"

Luke sighs and leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. Claspng his hands, he clears this throat. "Tyler adored you, Beth. You have to know that."

Tears pool in her eyes, and she pinches the bridge of her nose to halt them. She does *not* want to cry in front of Luke. "If he *adored* me, like you say, then he wouldn't have chosen the army over me."

"He was terrified."

Swiping at her eyes, she grunts out a humorless laugh. "Of what?"

"Of failing, for one thing. When it was just the two of you, he

figured he had time to establish a career. But when you told him you were pregnant, he panicked.”

Beth thinks back to Tyler’s reaction the day she shared the news. “He was ecstatic.”

“Yes, of course he was. But he didn’t know how to support you. He figured he’d go back for one more tour, and then he’d have enough GI benefits to pay for college.”

“If that’s true, why didn’t he tell me?”

Luke hesitates, and Beth sees a myriad of emotions cross his features, before he finally answers. “He didn’t think you’d support his decision.”

She throws her hands up. “I *wouldn’t* have. I would rather have had him at home with me, helping me raise our son. And I would’ve been right.”

Luke pushes a hand through his hair. “Which is what I tried to explain to him. I even offered him a job. I told him he could work up to foreman in no time, but he insisted he wasn’t the construction-worker type.”

An understatement if she ever heard one. “That’s certainly true. He couldn’t stand to do the simplest repairs around the house.” Beth blows out a breath, exhausted to the bone. Her eyes feel weighted, and she wants nothing more than the oblivion sleep will bring. She’s been fighting too many ghosts for far too long. “Regardless of his failures as a handyman or even as a husband, I shouldn’t have held you responsible for his decisions. I apologize, Luke.”

Luke smiles, but pain lingers in his eyes. “I accept your apology.”

“Had I kept *my* commitment to God since Tyler’s death, I’d have come around a lot sooner. Instead, I’ve wasted these last several years lamenting about how *unfair* my life is.”

“Nothing’s quite as unfair as being crucified on a cross for another’s sins.”

Beth feels the heat of shame on her face. How could she have been so blind for so long?

“So,” Luke says, standing. “Looks like you can use a good night’s sleep.”

Something still isn't right. "One more thing."

Luke groans, but drops back in his chair. "What?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Luke taps a finger on the table, as if contemplating his answer. Finally, he says, "You weren't ready to hear it."

That's it? "But I've been making accusations for *years*. You said nothing through Tyler's funeral or the weeks after. Just let me believe I was right."

"Nothing I could have said would have changed your mind."

"What about the *truth*? You could have saved us both a lot of grief had you told me six years ago."

Shaking his head, Luke's gaze catches Beth's. "You were looking for a scape goat, and I was it."

Beth slaps a hand over her mouth to hold back the cry. Was that true?

"And Beth?" He waits for her to focus on him. "I took it on because there is a part of me that feels responsible, regardless."

Beth sniffles. "I don't understand." She pulls a tissue from the pocket of her sweater and presses it to her nose.

Luke shifts his full cup aside and leans his elbows on the table. "We were best buds, Tyler and me." A smile tugs at his lips as if he's reliving a memory. "He wouldn't have joined up the first time if I hadn't." He shrugs. "So, I was willing to take on some of the blame, 'cause I think deep down, I felt it was deserved."

Beth reaches out and covers his clasped hands with one of hers, shocked by the sudden zing of warmth. Of course it makes sense, she tells herself. Aside from family, she hasn't had any male physical contact since Tyler's death. Still, she avoids eye contact and withdraws her hand. After clearing her throat, she says, "You're not to blame. Tyler made his choice, and he died by it. We both have to live with that."

"Get some sleep." Luke pushes up from the chair and offers a slight smile. "You're gonna need it. We have a lot of work to do in the next few months. I'll see myself out."

BETH

With a flick of her wrist, Beth bathes the basement stairs with light from the 100-watt bulb. Not enough to chase away the shadows, but enough to safely guide Michelle to the concrete floor.

“Watch your step, Shell.” She leads the way, hand hovering over the rustic two-by-six handrail, unwilling to risk splinters unless necessary. “The last thing we need is for you to do a header down the stairs.”

“You worry too much. I’m as agile as you. At least for another couple months.”

Beth stops mid-way and turns to her friend. “I’d feel a lot better if you’d give this idea a pass.”

“Are you kidding me?” Shell stops one step above Beth and urges her on with a slight nudge. “You act like I’m an invalid or something. Is this how you were treated when you were pregnant?”

“No, but you and Paul have been trying for *years*, and if anything happens to you, I don’t want to be partly to blame.” Beth reaches the bottom of the floor and hits a switch. Florescent lights flood the dark cave-of-a-basement, highlighting cobwebs and years of accumulated dust, along with furniture crammed and stacked.

“Wow.” Shell stops on the last stair and throws her hands up. “This is so *cool*! Did you have any idea all this was down here?”

Beth yanks a rag from her back pocket. “Not until I came down the other day.”

“So how did you manage to get the dry sink upstairs?” She moves further into the basement, touching a piece here and there.

“Very carefully.”

“The marble top alone must weigh thirty pounds.”

Beth grimaces at the memory. “At least. But I’m stronger than I look.” Even so, she’s willing to hire muscle the next time. Or maybe sweet talk it.

“And you’re worried about *me* getting hurt. It’s pure luck you didn’t throw your back out.” Michelle crouches in front of antique, full-size sleigh bed. “You can’t seriously be considering hauling this stuff upstairs.” She looks over her shoulder at Beth.

“Not by myself, but I’m sure Luke’ll help.”

Michelle’s eyes widen. “Do tell.” With a smirk, she stands and crosses her arms. “Since when are you willing to ask Luke for a favor?”

Beth moves past her friend and feigns interest in a mirror. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“No? Two weeks ago, I thought you were going to put out a hit on him.”

“Ha ha ha. Very funny.”

“So? What changed?”

With the flick of a rag over the top of a dresser, Beth stirs up a fog of dust. She waits until a coughing fit subsides before attempting to answer. “You were right, and I was wrong.” She croaks. “Will that suffice?”

“Not on your life.” Michelle swipes a swath of blond bangs from her eyes. “Give me the deets, my friend.”

“Help me tag which pieces to have taken upstairs and I’ll tell you everything you want to know over lunch. How’s that?”

“Works for me.”

Grateful for the reprieve, Beth focuses on the task at hand. She’s

not quite ready to share her conversation with Luke, even with her best friend. It's too new, too tenuous. A part of her wants to revel in her recommitment to God and the softening of her heart toward Luke. What if it doesn't last? She's been holding onto her anger like a miser with a bag of money for far too long. Is it too much to hope it can be that easy?

"What is it we're looking for, exactly?" Shell asks.

"I'll know it when I see it." Rag tucked once again into her back pocket, Beth pushes at a dresser. It only weighs a ton or two. "I was thinking that if I can refinish some of these pieces, I can use them to stage the house before it goes on the market."

"And then what'll you do with them?"

"What'd you mean?"

"Well, once the B & B sells, are you going to have them shipped to Arizona?"

"Yeah right." Beth opens her arms wide to encompass the basement. "Like I have room for *any* of this stuff in my dinky apartment."

With a shake of her head, Michelle leans her hip on a sideboard. "You think you can put your blood, sweat and tears into these beautiful pieces and then just let them go?"

"Of course I can," Beth lies. "It's just stuff."

"Yeah, your *Grandmother's* stuff. No way you can ignore sentimentality and walk away from all this."

"I don't have a choice."

"Your feud with Luke doesn't appear to be a deterrent for you staying anymore."

Irritation pulls a scowl from Beth. "Don't *even* start that again."

"You're impossible."

"Can we just stick to the plan right now? You said you'd help me catalogue the furniture. I need to see what's usable now and what needs some refinishing or repairs."

"Fine." Michelle's tone is anything but fine. "Just don't forget you promised to spill all the details at lunch, today." She squeezes through a narrow pathway and squats in front of a chest.

“Nag, nag, nag,” Beth mutters. “You must be practicing for motherhood.”

“Hey, what’s this?”

Beth glances at Michelle, who’s on her haunches in front of a chest, hand propping the lid open.

“Did your grandma have a hope chest?”

“I don’t know. What’s in there?”

“Just old stuff.”

“Vintage, Shell. Not *old*.”

“Whatever. One man’s junk and all that.”

“I’ll take whatever I can get. The more authentic, the better.”

“Anyone down here?” Luke’s voice floats from the top of the stairs.

“Yeah,” Beth calls back.

Footsteps scuffle on the wooden steps and Luke materializes. “What’re you two doing down here, besides breathing in dust and cobwebs?”

“Beth has this brilliant idea that you’re going to haul this stuff upstairs so she can stage the house,” Michelle says, slapping her hands on the seat of her jeans.

Beth pins Shell with a glare. Her plan was to *ease* him into the idea, not hit him over the head with it. A little finesse, a little manipulation—

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Luke says. “Dave and Bruce can help, too. Just tell us where you want everything. Is it okay if we take T.J. to lunch with us? We’re just going to Backroads.”

Michelle’s mouth drops open.

“Sure,” Beth says as she smirks at Shell. Looks like she won’t have to use finesse and manipulation after all.



Luke

LUKE STEERS T.J. down the sidewalk with a hand on his shoulder. “You warm enough?”

“Yup.” T.J.’s grin is about as wide as the Mississippi. You’d think he won a free-for-all at a toy store rather than lunch with the guys.

Dave and Bruce follow behind, discussing the intricacies of fitting crown molding around an outer corner. Sutter Creek is busy, even post-Christmas. The historic gold mining town draws a crowd all year around, but nothing like at Christmas. Fake greenery and red bows, put up before Thanksgiving, arch across old highway 49 every twenty feet or so. More bows and ribbons are tacked onto every post fronting a variety of businesses from restaurants to antique stores and even the occasional law firm. It’s about time they come down. Nothing sadder than dragging Christmas out for weeks. Except maybe starting it in September.

They arrive at the cafe, two blocks down and across the street from the B & B, and a bell tinkles to announce their arrival. Not that anyone can hear it with the lunch crowd. He turns to Bruce and Dave. “Why don’t you take T.J. with you and see if there’s a table in back. I’ll order.”

Bruce nods. “Come on, little guy. Let’s go save a table.”

T.J. takes Bruce’s hand as they navigate the crowd waiting to order, but Dave doesn’t move.

“What’ll you have?” Luke asks him.

Dave feigns a look of confusion. “A little information for starters.”

“What’d you mean?”

He hitches a thumb toward the back. “Since when do you bring a little tyke to lunch?”

“Don’t go making a mountain out of a molehill.”

“Come on, Luke. What gives? I thought you and Beth were sworn enemies.”

Best way to handle Dave is to ignore him. “Things change.” He steps up to order. “Hey, Tina. How’s it goin’ today?”

“Good, Luke. See you brought the whole crew with you.”

Dave leans in. “And then some.”

Tina smiles. “So, who’s the new addition?”

“That’s Bruce,” Luke says. “You met him the other day.”

"I think she's talking about T.J.," Dave interjects as someone jostles him.

Luke glares at his foreman. "Why don't you join the boys, Dave? I'll get this."

With a laugh, Dave saunters away.

Turning back to Tina, Luke says, "We'll take three specials, a melted cheese sandwich and four waters."

"So, you're not going to tell me who the kid is?" Tina teases.

"Tyler Hanson's boy," Luke admits. "Beth's here having her grand-ma's B & B restored with the intention of selling. My crew's got the job, and I just thought it might be nice if T.J. hung out with the guys for a bit."

Tina's eyes widen. "That cute little boy is Tyler's? Should have known, he looks just like him."

"Yes, he does."

"You're pretty sweet, Luke. If I wasn't already happily married, I think I'd set my cap for you."

Much to Luke's chagrin, he feels heat steal up his cheeks.

Tina hands him a placard with the number 19 on it. "Why don't you pay on the way out? And I'll add a mookie for T.J. on the house."

Luke eyes the cafe's famous oatmeal cookie creation through the clear glass. Should've thought of that himself. "Thanks, Tina." He steps away from the counter and navigates his way through the crowd of patrons, waving and nodding along the way at those he knows. The boys are set up at a table for four against the back wall. He plops the number down and sits next to T.J.

Dave sits tall, arms crossed. "T.J. was telling us about Arizona."

"Is that so?" Luke hopes he isn't nosy enough to fish the kid for details that are none of his business.

Bruce looks from Dave to Luke, confusion clouding his eyes. "So, if Beth's from Arizona, how is it you know her?"

"We all went to school together," Dave says. "T.J.'s daddy was one of our crowd."

"My daddy's dead," T.J. tells Bruce, matter-of-factly.

"I'm sorry, kid."

“It’s okay.” He shrugs. “I got Mommy and Grandma and Grandpop. And Mommy says that when we move into a real house, we can get a dog.” He looks up at Luke. “Cept I’m gonna really miss Miter. He’s like my best friend.”

Luke tousles T.J.’s hair. “He thinks you’re pretty special, too, kiddo.”

“So, T.J.?” Dave leans toward the boy. “Anyone else special to you back home in Arizona?”

Luke shoots Dave a warning glare.

“Oh, sure,” T.J. says.

“Who’s that?” Dave prompts. Luke’d shut him down, but he’s a little curious himself. Not that it makes any difference.

T.J. holds up a finger for each person he names. “Well, there’s Jonathon and Stuart and Grayson.”

“Friends of your mom’s?” Dave asks while Luke holds his breath.

T.J. laughs and slaps his forehead. “A course not! They’re in preschool with me.

Breathing eases and Luke throws Dave a smirk. So much for interrogation.

“Here we go,” Tina announces, balancing a tray of food. “We have three specials...” she places a plate in front of the three men. “And for T.J., a melted cheese sandwich and a mookie. I’ll be right back with waters all around.”

“Thanks, Mr. Luke,” T.J. says, picking up half his sandwich.

“Thank Mr. Dave,” Luke says. “He’s buying.”

BETH

Six weeks into the remodel, and Beth's giddy with the results. Then again, the spring-like weather may be partly to blame for her sudden euphoria. A teaser of things to come. Or maybe it has to do with the valentine card she received from Luke yesterday—a Valentine from a “friend.” That's what they are. Friends. She wouldn't have believed it possible that Luke could hold a special place in her heart. But he does. And she has an inkling he feels the same way.

Shoving aside the random, and *insane*, thought that anything more can come of their newfound friendship, she hustles T.J. through breakfast.

“It's the perfect day for a little hike,” she tells him, as she washes his cereal bowl.

“Can we take Miter?” T.J. swipes his crumpled napkin across his mouth. “He likes to hike, too.”

“I'm sure Luke won't mind.” She does a quick inventory of the counters. The kitchen remodel starts today and she promised to have them cleared off. “Why don't you go brush your teeth and get dressed. That way, as soon as Miter gets here, we can be off.”

“Okay.”

She hears the rumble of an engine and peeks out the window. Luke's truck is pulling into the lot, the bed filled to the brim with materials. He parks next to the green dumpster that's become a part of the landscape since the beginning of the remodel. She turns in a slow circle, committing to memory the worn out kitchen, as if she won't have the pictures to remind her. This is where her grandma spent the better part of fifty years cooking meals. Most notable, five-star breakfasts for guests. Beth doesn't take her cooking skills for granted—they were passed down from generation to generation. A shame it's all wasted on a picky five-year-old.

C'est la vivre!

Beth hears Luke's low voice talking to Miter, and she opens the door. They're nose to nose. So close, she can see the pupils of his eyes. Her heart skips a beat and her mouth goes dry, making speech impossible. What is *wrong* with her?

"Morning." Luke's smile is contagious.

She clears her throat. "Morning."

Miter doesn't wait for formalities, but shoves the door open and rushes through the kitchen in his search of T.J.

"Pushy dog," Luke says, stepping in behind him. He glances around the kitchen. "Looks like you're ready for us."

Beth nods, hoping it'll shake whatever fog's taken over her brain. "I thought I'd take advantage of this beautiful weather and take T.J. for a little hike. But of course, he doesn't want to go anywhere without Miter."

Luke catches Beth's gaze. "What're we going to do about this love affair when you return to Arizona?"

It takes her a scant moment to realize Luke's referring to T.J. and Miter. When did she become a lovestruck heroine in a Victorian novel? *Lovestruck? Nah.* "I don't know." She forces a lightness in her tone. "Miter doesn't have opposable thumbs, so I don't imagine he's much good at texting."

Luke chuckles. "No. But he does love to hike, so if you want to take him, you're more than welcome."

Is it just Beth or does Luke seem a little awkward, too?

“We’re ready.” T.J. barrels into the kitchen with Miter in tow. “Hey Mr. Luke.”

“Hey kiddo. You guys are going on a hike, I hear.”

“Yep.”

“I’ll walk out with you and grab some dog biscuits for Miter. You might want his water mug, too.”

“Sounds good,” Beth says, as T.J. and Miter race out the back door.

“Boy, I sure wish I had that kid’s energy.” Luke holds the door open and waits for Beth.

“Hang on one sec.” She retrieves the backpack she’d prepared earlier from a kitchen chair and slings it over her shoulder. “Miter’s not the only one who’ll need sustenance.”

By the time Beth has T.J. and Miter loaded into the car, the rest of Luke’s crew arrives. She gives them a quick wave and pulls out of the lot.

“Where’re we goin’?” T.J. asks from his carseat in the back, his nose pressed against the window.

“Do you need me to roll your window down, too?” Beth takes a quick glance at Miter in her side mirror, his head hanging out the window, ears and tongue whipping in the breeze.

“Is it a *hard* hike?”

“Not at all. It’s more like a walk. I thought you’d like to see where I used to explore with Auntie Shell and your daddy.”

“Okay.”

Five minutes later, Beth parks the car on the shoulder of a quiet road. Just off the embankment, a thicket of trees—oak, pine and manzanita—opens up the wondrous breadth of a child’s imagination seemingly far away from the modern world. She and Tyler spent hours exploring abandoned caves and old mine shafts, fantasizing the days of long ago.

“This is it.” Her voice is church-soft, as if the mere sound of the present might scare off the past.

T.J. is out of his carseat, tugging on the back door handle. “Can’t you unlock the door? Pleeeease.”

“Wait for me, sweetie.” Beth gathers the backpack before punching the unlock mechanism. Climbing out of the car, she opens Miter’s door before rounding onto the passenger side to help T.J. Not that he needs it.

“What’s down there?” He points to the thicket, wonder in his voice and eyes.

“Whatever you want.”

“Huh?” His little brows furrow as he looks up at her. “I don’t get it.”

“Well, it can be Robin Hood’s forrest or... ” Beth searches for examples he might understand. “... Or Narnia or Mogli’s jungle.”

His face crestfallen, T.J. sighs. “That’s made up places.”

With a frown, Beth squats in front of him. Was it *her* fault T.J. lacked imagination? After all, imagination is just another avenue for dreaming. And God knows, she’s not done much of that in his young life. “This is where you let your imagination take over, sweetie.”

“Like make believe?”

“Exactly!” She swivels on her toes and extends a sweeping hand out to encompass the thicket. “You can pretend that it’s any place you want. That’s where great, big dreams start.”

“You mean like the dreams I have when I’m asleep?”

“Well, yes.” Beth sighs. How can she explain the idea of life-long dreams to a child? “But you can dream when you’re awake, too. Sometimes, it’s those dreams that help you decide what you want to be when you grow up.”

“I wanna be a fireman.”

A smile tugs at Beth’s lips. “When I was your age, I wanted to be a ballerina. Then, when I got a little older, I wanted to be a rock star.”

T.J. snickers. “You can’t be a rock star! You’re a mommy.”

“That’s the beauty of dreams, kiddo. You can be more than one thing.”

“Do you still wanna be a rock star?”

With a laugh, Beth shakes her head and stands up. “No. I don’t have a very good singing voice. That’s kind of important to be a rock star.”

“What *can* you do besides be a mommy?”

“Well.” Beth huffs out a breath. “I can cook. I learned that from your grandma, who learned it from her mommy. And her mommy is the one that owned the B & B.”

“Now *you* do, right mommy?”

“For now.”

“Then why don’t you do what grandma’s mommy did? Cook.”

If only life were that simple.



Luke

LUKE SWINGS the sledgehammer with every ounce of strength he has left and the cabinet drops. Finally. He wipes the sweat from his brow with the back of his sleeve and motions for Bruce to move in. Might be time to leave the demolition to the young guy.

“Looks like that’s it,” Dave says. “We’ll have this mess cleaned up by the end of the day and can start putting it back together tomorrow.”

Like Luke needs a blow by blow. “Don’t count your chickens, Sally. The works not gonna to get done if you waste time yammering about it.”

“What’s got you in such a sunny disposition?” Dave’s tone is tinged with amusement.

Luke doesn’t bother to answer. Instead, he motions Dave to help him move the busted cabinet. They each hoist an end and maneuver it out the back steps and to the dumpster. The kitchen’s the last of the remodel. He should be dancing a jig. He’s ahead of schedule and under budget. Just what every contractor hopes for. Instead, he’s lookin’ for ways to drag it out. Maybe the appliances won’t come in on time. Or, maybe Beth’d rather have the eight-burner gas stovetop instead of the six-burner. That’d require a couple more weeks—four if it’s backordered.

“You about ready to break for lunch?” Dave stands by the dump-

ster, hands on hips and looks from Luke to Bruce, as Beth's car pulls in.

Luke's mood warms by degrees. "You guys go ahead. I've got a few things I need to get done."

Dave glances at Beth's car, then at Luke, eyebrows hitched. "Sure you do. Come on, Bruce." He nudges the younger man with an elbow. "You're buyin' today."

Luke waits in the yard as the guys exit around the side of the house. Going to Backroads again, no doubt. Doesn't have much time to think about it as Miter explodes from the car and nearly barrels into Luke. You'd think the dog was gone a week instead of a few hours. T.J.'s next, with Beth taking up the rear at a more leisurely pace.

"We went to Narnia!" T.J. announces. "I even saw Mr. Beaver's cave house and everything."

Luke hasn't a clue what T.J.'s referring to, but his enthusiasm has Luke chuckling. "Narnia, huh?"

"Yeah. Miter and me are gonna have lunch now."

"Not in the kitchen, T.J." Beth holds up the backpack. "I packed your lunch in here today. Mr. Luke's working in there, remember?"

"When will you be done?" T.J. buries a hand in Miter's ear.

"Not for a couple weeks, at least," Luke says. More, if they're lucky.

"Then where're we gonna eat?" T.J. looks from Luke to Beth, concern etched in his features.

"No worries," Beth says. "I have a microwave and toaster oven set up in the basement. There's even a fridge down there." Crouching down to his level, she lowers her voice, like their new adventure is a deep, dark secret. "We can pretend we're living in a cave."

T.J.'s face lights up and he claps his hands. "We get to use or maginations?"

"Yes!" Beth pulls him in for a quick hug, which is all he'll allow. "But right now, you can eat your sandwich on the front porch." She pulls a paper sack from her backpack and hands it to him. "There's an apple and juice box in there, too. Just don't give any to Miter."

“Kay.” He scampers across the yard and down the side of the house, Miter at his heels.

Luke watches until they disappear then turns back to Beth. “What’s this about imagination?”

Swinging the backpack onto her shoulder, Beth grimaces. “I think I’ve been a colossal failure as a mom.” Her brows furrow, and tears pool in her eyes.

“Hey, hey.” He rubs her arm and resists the urge to pull her into a hug. “You’re a *great* mom. Where’s this coming from?”

She knuckles a tear away and takes a few breaths before speaking. “I had to *teach* him today how to imagine. Can you believe it?”

“Uh, yeah.” He’s tempted to tack on a *duh*. “How else is he supposed to learn?”

“*Exactly.*”

Luke chuckles. “You’re not making any sense.”

Beth throws her hands up, moves to the back steps and plops onto them. She drops the backpack to the ground with a *thunk*. “This is something he should be well-versed in by now.”

“Ah.” Now he sees where she’s going. “I don’t think it’s too late. He’s a quick study.”

“Much quicker than I,” she mumbles.

“Well,” Luke says, sitting next to her. “I don’t think it’s too late for you, either. You certainly have used your imagination on this place. I’ve seen you change it from an abandoned old house to a warm B & B. You’ve repapered, repainted and refinished your little fingers to the bone.”

She cocks her head to offer him a smile. “That’s sweet of you to say. But you’re the one who did all the heavy lifting. Literally,” she adds with a laugh.

She did have a way of sweet talking him into moving massive amounts of furniture from the basement. “Yeah, well I wouldn’t have had the vision to *stage*?” He looks at her for confirmation. She nods, and he continues. “To stage the house the way you have. Once we get the kitchen done, you’ll be ready for business.” The words sour his stomach. It won’t be *her* business, but there’s nothing he can do about

it. Time to change the subject. “So,” he says. “What other talents do you possess that I don’t know about?”

“You and T.J.”

“What’d you mean?”

“He asked me the same thing earlier.”

“And?”

“And,” she draws the word out. “I told him I can cook. Although, it’s a talent wasted on a five-year-old. He’d prefer Cheerios to eggs Benedict and hot dogs to beef wellington.”

“That good, are you?”

She flashes him a grin and shrugs. “Hey, when you’ve got it, you’ve got it.”

“You willing to put your money where your mouth is?”

“*Not* with a microwave and a toaster oven, but you get my kitchen done and I’ll take you up on that bet.”

“Deal.” Luke sticks out his hand.

“Deal,” Beth says, slipping her smaller one into his.

BETH

The florescent lights only emphasize the emptiness of the basement. Or nearly empty. A junky table, not anywhere *close* to the treasure category Beth prefers, sits against one cement wall—the makeshift kitchen with a microwave, toaster oven and miscellaneous paraphernalia. That, a small fridge and the refinished kitchen table Beth put her heart and soul into are all that’s left.

“When did you finish this?” Michelle leans over the fifty-two inch round table and runs a hand over the smooth, glossy surface.

“A couple days ago.” Beth pours water from a jug into two bright pink mugs, sets them in the microwave and keys in 6-0 and *start*. She should be *thrilled* at the progress that’s been made on the house. Luke promised he’d do his best to be done by April 1st, and he’s ahead of schedule. According the two realtors with whom Beth met, it’s worth more than even *she* could have hoped for. Now it’s only a matter of crossing on proverbial dotted line.

“You don’t seem too thrilled about it. I think it’s stunning. How many coats of tung oil did you use?”

Beth shrugs. “Eight, I think. I kind of lost count.”

“You’re not happy with how it turned out?” Michelle pulls out one of the chairs and eases into it. Even at only twenty weeks along, her

baby bump is making its presence known. Paul and Michelle opted to be surprised about the sex of the baby. Beth's praying for twins—one of each.

"No." Beth tucks her hair behind her ear. "I mean, yes." The microwave beeps and she pops the door open then removes the cups with care. "Camomille?"

"Perfect. You have any coasters?"

After dropping a tea bag into each cup, she rips a couple paper towels from the roll amid the clutter on the makeshift counter. "Use these."

"Are you okay?" Michelle blows on her tea and eyes Beth.

"Yes. Of course." She doesn't *dare* hint that she's not too keen about leaving the B & B. Michelle'd be on her in a heartbeat, trying to talk her into staying. And really, nothing's changed. Except—

"Beth? You down there?" Luke's voice breaks into her thoughts.

"Yeah. What'd you need?"

"Is T.J. with you?"

"No. He's playing out back." Her heart skips a beat. "Isn't he?"

Luke doesn't respond.

Beth crosses the basement to the bottom of the stairs and calls up. "Luke?"

"He's not outside. I thought maybe they were down there."

"They?" Michelle asks Beth.

"T.J. and Miter. I'm going to look around the house."

Beth doesn't wait for Michelle, but rushes up the stairs. "No need to panic," she whispers to herself. It's not the first time T.J.'s disappeared only to be found inside. And now that Beth's opened up the idea of imagining, he's likely to be playing in an empty closet.

Luke's waiting for her in the hallway. "He's around here somewhere."

"I know." She assures herself as much as Luke. "Have you checked his bedroom?"

"I'll do that now."

"If he's not there, Luke, can you check the entire second floor? I'll check the third. And don't forget to look in the closets."

Luke nods. "Got it."

With every empty room, every empty closet, Beth's heart notches up a gear. It's one thing for a little boy to hide, it's another for an eighty-pound dog. She doesn't need to ask if anyone's found him. She recognizes Dave, Bruce and Michelle's voices calling, "T.J. Miter," along with Luke's.

Five minutes later, everyone regroups in the parlor. Beth's chest is tight, and a wail builds in her throat. Where could he be?

"It'll be okay." Luke wraps a comforting arm around Beth's shoulders and addresses the search party. "Dave, why don't you go down to Backroads. Maybe he went there. And call, as soon as you know anything."

Dave catches Beth's eye as he leaves. "We'll find him. I promise."

"I'll check Choco-Latte," Bruce volunteers. "And if he's not there, I'll ask around and see if anyone's seen them." He follows Dave through the foyer and out the front door.

"He knows he's not allowed to cross the street alone." Beth pushes a shaky hand through her hair. *Please, Lord, let him be there.* But what if he's not? She pulls away from Luke and claps a hand over her mouth to hold in the wail, eyes beseeching his.

"What is it, Beth?"

Dropping her hand from her mouth, she voices the unthinkable, "What if somebody snatched him?"

"Wait," Michelle says. "Didn't you say he's with Miter?" Her own hand rests on her belly, as if protecting her unborn baby.

"Yeah, why?" Luke asks.

"It's not likely anyone is going to snatch a kid with a dog that size. Miter wouldn't let it happen without a fight."

"She's got a point," Luke tells Beth.

"We need to call the police." With shaky fingers, Beth reaches for her cell.

"Let's give it a few more minutes." Luke stills her hand with his. "The guys'll know pretty quickly if T.J.'s been—" Luke's phone rings, and he yanks it from his back pocket. With a flick of his thumb, he's connected.

Beth holds her breath as Luke listens, and when his expression tightens, she grasps Michelle's outstretched hand.

"That was Dave. No one's seen him." The fear in Beth's heart is mirrored in his eyes.

Beth refuses to give into despair. "Maybe Bruce—"

Luke shakes his head. "He met up with Bruce. No luck. They're going to keep looking, down back streets, in other shops, while we start a thorough search of the neighborhood."

Tears burn Beth's nose and eyes. Would God be so cruel to take her son away from her, too? She closes her eyes to pray, but words won't come. *Breathe... just breathe.* The constriction in her chest eases and a voice fills her spirit—*Be still and know that I am God.*

"We'll find him." Beth's voice is firm and sure. She looks from Luke to Michelle. "We'll find him."

Michelle's watery eyes meet Beth's. "Yes."

"I'm sure you're right, Beth. But I think now might be a good time to call the police." Luke thumbs his phone and starts to punch in a number when a bark pierces the quiet. Luke's gaze meets Beth's. "Sounds like Miter." He rushes through the parlor and down the hall toward the kitchen with Beth and Michelle tailing him.

Beth sees Luke fly out the kitchen door and follows. Miter stands in the middle of the yard, barking. But where's T.J.? "He's alone?" Beth's eyes frantically search for her son. "He wouldn't leave T.J., would he?"

"Come 'ere, boy," Luke croones to the dog. But for each step he takes toward the dog, Miter takes a step back and continues his maniacal barking.

Luke looks over his shoulder at Beth. "I think he wants me to follow him."



Luke

AFTER SOME FINAGLING, Luke grasps Miter's collar. "It's about time,"

he mutters. The dog lurches and jumps in an attempt to break his hold, wrenching Luke's hand in the process. "Grab his leash from the back of my truck," Luke yells over his shoulder. The behavior is so uncharacteristic for Miter, it *has* to mean something. *Please let him know where T.J. is, please let him know where T.J. is...* The prayer is a perpetual chant in his head.

Beth pushes the leash at Luke, then wraps her arms around Miter's midsection and plants her feet firmly in the dirt, holding him down.

Luke snaps the leash on and wipes the sweat from his brow with the back of his sleeve. "Okay, let's see where he'll take us." He gives Beth his most encouraging smile.

"What'd you want me to do?" Michelle asks from the back porch. "Should I call the police?"

"Keep your phone handy." Miter lurches, straining Luke's shoulder. "I'll call you if we don't have any luck. Let the guys know what we're doing if they get back before us."

Luke wraps the end of the leash in his hand and allows Miter the lead. He doesn't even want to *think* about any possibility other than finding T.J. unharmed. The loss Beth suffered from Tyler's death won't compare to the loss of her little boy.

"You keeping up?" He calls to Beth, several steps behind.

"Yes," she pants. "But if I can't, don't let me slow you down."

When Miter crosses Main Street, Luke has to hold him back from crashing through window shoppers. Three blocks down the semi-crowded street, and Miter whips a left down a quieter one. Luke doesn't need to turn to see if Beth's keeping up, he can hear her footsteps and labored breathing. Two hundred yards... four hundred yards... and Miter doesn't slow down. No more houses, just land—thick trees and tufts of greenery poking through last year's weeds. The paved road gives way to a mixture of gravel and sand and eventually dirt. A dilapidated ranch fence runs along the street—rusted barbed wire and split posts. A break in the fence opens, and Miter charges up the embankment and into the field.

Luke trips on a rock and almost does a header. Righting himself,

he takes a moment to glance back at Beth, who's starting to lag. Where is Miter taking them? It doesn't seem likely that T.J. would've gotten this far. Another hundred yards or so, and Miter slows, nose to the ground. Luke unhooks the leash.

"What're you doing?" Beth's words are choppy as she attempts to talk and catch her breath at the same time. "Won't he take off?"

Luke shakes his head, focused on Miter, who's sniffing around an old oak, thick with mistletoe, its branches hanging low. "I think he's looking for T.J. Just give him a little space and—"

Miter's head shoots up and he barks.

Luke rushes ahead to see what he's found, ducking beneath a black-cruled branch. "What is it, boy? Where's T.J.?" Luke's foot gives way and he pinwheels his arms to reestablish his balance. There's a hole in the ground. An old mine shaft. He drops to his hands and knees and hangs his head over to peer inside the dark interior.

"What is it?" Beth drops down next to him.

"An old mine shaft." He squints as his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He can just make out a red shirt and light hair. "T.J.? Can you hear me?"

Beth latches onto Luke's forearm. "Is he in there? Do you see him?" Panic laces her tone.

Miter dances in circles, barking.

"Yes." Luke throws her a cautious smile. He's down there, but how badly is he hurt? He rises to his knees and retrieves his phone. "I'm going to call 911. I want you to call Michelle and see if the guys are back yet. If they are, tell them where we are and have them bring some rope and safety gear from my truck."

"But..." Her eyes are glued to the form thirty feet below.

"Beth." Luke grasps her arm and tugs until she looks at him. "I need you to stay calm. Can you do that?"

She nods, but her eyes are glazed and unfocused.

He takes her chin in one hand and turns her focus onto him. "Can you call Michelle?"

"Yes," she manages, her voice barely discernible.

"What're you going to tell her?"

“Rope and... and...” her stricken gaze meets his.

“Safety gear.” His tone is firm.

She nods, and it’s as if she’s come out of a trance. Her eyes clear and resolute. “Yes. Safety gear.” She pushes off the ground and stands. “What street did we come down?”

“Eureka. Tell them to go a half a mile and then east onto the ranch land.” While she makes the call, he thumbs 9-1-1.

BETH

Beth looks at the still form of her little boy, sleeping off the excitement of the last twenty-four hours. Back in his own bed, where he belongs. *How fortunate he was.* That was the consensus of the hospital staff who treated him for a broken arm and concussion. But Beth knows better. It wasn't *fortunate*, it was God's protection over her baby.

She runs butterfly-light fingers over his face and hair then reaches for Miter, lying on the end of the bed, T.J.'s mighty protector who refuses to leave his side. Never has she seen a stronger bond between dog and boy. Just the thought of separating them wrenches her heart.

Leaving T.J.'s door ajar, she steps from his bedroom and wanders through the house. What was a drafty mansion a mere two months ago is now a Victorian showpiece, thanks to the work of Luke and his crew, and Beth's diligence in authenticity. The woodwork is once again lustrous, and Luke did a beautiful job with the windows. No one will ever know that they aren't original. Energy-efficient, but *not* original. Every room is staged. The pieces lovingly polished, some refinished, to give the air of a time long gone. And although the kitchen is getting a full overhaul, whoever buys the property is sure to

appreciate the reliable, vintage-looking appliances and new cabinetry.

Beth steps down into the foyer, her eyes once again admiring her grandma's dry sink sitting in the corner. It really should be in one of the bedrooms, but it fits into the space as if made for it.

"Enjoying your handiwork?"

The deep timbre of Luke's voice breaks through Beth's musings. "Just remembering what it was like when I was little."

He fingers one of the flowers in the vase on the dry sink. "Your grandma would be proud."

"Maybe." Beth wonders how her grandma would've reacted to her selling the place.

"How's T.J.?" Crossing his arms, Luke leans against the door jamb.

"Right now, he's sleeping under Miter's ever-watchful eye." She smiles. "Your dog is something else."

"They're a pair, all right. Not sure how well Miter'll do without him." Is that a question Beth hears in his voice? "So..." Luke draws the word out.

"So...?" Beth's gaze catches Luke's and is held captive.

"Have you considered staying?"

His question is all it takes for her to break eye contact. How can she allow him to see her own inner struggle? "You sound like Michelle." She moves past him and into the parlor, but can feel his gaze burning a hole in her back. "When I came here, I had a plan. That hasn't changed."

"And what's the plan?" Luke's voice is tinged with a challenge.

Facing him, she spreads her arms wide. "Do you know how much I can get for this place?" When he merely stares at her, she continues. "Enough that I can finally buy a house. Maybe go back to school."

"To do what?"

"I don't know," she says with a scowl. Why is he pushing her? "What do you care?"

In two strides, Luke is in Beth's space, and when he cups her cheek with his hand, breathing's impossible. "I care." The words are soft, and all the more powerful for it. "This place is in your blood."

She wants to sink against him, feel his arms around her. But then his words penetrate and she steps out of his hold, drawing in air once again. “You can’t seriously be suggesting *I* run the B & B.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I...” she grapples for reasons. “For one thing, I owe my parents a lot of money, Luke. I can’t pay them back if I don’t sell.”

“I’m sure your parents will understand if it takes a while to get established. Once you have it up and running, you can always make payments.”

“And what about T.J.?”

“What about him?”

“I want to send him to a private school, and to afford that—”

“Sutter Creek has a great elementary school.”

“My parents would be so disappointed if I relocate here. T.J.’s their only grandchild.”

“Arizona’s not that far away.”

The truth is, the idea of staying scares Beth. Her feelings for Luke will only grow stronger, but if he isn’t of the same mind... well, then she’s in for more heartache.

“What’s really holding you back, Beth?”

She hugs her arms tight around her. Does she have the courage to just lay it all out there? And if she does, will he be honest with her?

“I can see your mind spinning.” He smiles, as if he’s already won. “Come on, what’s going on?”

Beth glances at him and then away. She wets her lips. “You.” The word hangs in the air for a moment. Then two.

“You still blame me for Tyler’s death.” Luke’s tone is laced with dejection.

“No!” Beth might be a chicken about sharing her feelings, but she’s not about to let Luke believe the worst. “I don’t still blame you.”

“Then I don’t understand. Why would I be the reason you don’t want to stay?” Confusion clouds his eyes.

“It’s just... well...” She wrings her hands and sinks into the velvet divan. Why, oh, why didn’t she just keep her mouth shut? Eyes downcast, she admits, “I’m beginning to have feelings for you.” The

words hang in the air, with all the grace of an elephant attempting a waltz.

The shuffle of Luke's boots on the hardwood floor pulls Beth's attention back to him. He sits next to her, his broad body at odds in the dainty chair. "But that's a *good* thing, isn't it?"

Her eyes flick to his. "Is it?"

He grins. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"If you don't share those feelings, then... " Heat steals up her cheeks.

He takes her chin in his palm and raises her face toward his. "But I do." His lips meet hers in a soft, unthreatening kiss, giving her time to pull away if she chooses.

She doesn't. Instead she revels in the warmth zinging through her body, awakening something long ago forgotten—a memory of a sweeter time. After Luke eases back mere inches, Beth let's out a soft breath and touches her lips, as if she can hold onto the feeling for a little longer.

"So, what do you say?" Luke's casual question belies the angst Beth reads in his eyes and posture.

But how can one kiss determine her future—her *son's* future. "It was nice—"

"Nice?" Luke rubs his chin and Beth can hear the scratch of whiskers against his hand. "I was looking for spectacular. Or maybe wonderful, but *nice*?"

Beth can't help the bubble of laughter that escapes. He looks so forlorn. "Okay, I'll give you a... four out of five. How's that?"

"Better than a nice rating."

She touches his arm with a tentative hand. "It doesn't matter how amazing your kiss felt—"

"Now we're talking."

"I can't uproot my life when there are no guarantees."

He frowns and takes both her hands in his, and Beth revels in the callused strength of them—both gentle and protective. "You, of all people, know there are no guarantees. We make the best decisions we

can given the information we have. However, my suggestion is that you pray about it. God knows every facet of your life up until the day He'll take you home."

Could it be that easy?

EPILOGUE

Six Months Later

Beth

Indian Summer sun fills the parlor with warmth as a sweet breeze, perfumed with the scent of gardenias, dances through the window sheers. Beth's gaze flits across the crowded room, past her parents and Luke's engaged in lively conversation, past Michelle and Paul, showing off baby Emma to Dave and his wife, past the myriad of other guests she doesn't take time to register.

"Looking for someone, Mrs. Kingsford?" The timbre of Luke's deep voice in her ear sends a shiver down her spine.

"As a matter of fact..." she turns, slipping into his strong arms. "I was looking for my husband."

"Well, you found him. Now what?" His smile holds a hint of things to come.

Warmth steals up Beth's cheeks and it takes a moment to find her voice. "It's about time we head to the airport, don't you think?" The words come out breathless.

He grins. "Married only four hours and you're already bossing me around." He drops a soft kiss onto her mouth. "I like it."

“Hey Mom.” T.J. tugs at Beth’s dress. “When’re you leaving?” A tinge of excitement flavors his question.

Luke steps back and gives T.J. a mock glare. “Can’t you see we’re busy here?”

T.J. grins. “You don’t look busy to me.”

Beth laughs. “You trying to get rid of us already?”

“Grandpop said me and Miter can do some adventures with him after you go.”

“He did, did he?” Beth glances across the room at her parents, laughing at something Conner Kingsford said. She’d worried for days over telling them that she was staying in Sutter Creek, and for nothing. Somehow, they suspected as much and had already conjured up a plan. They’d split their time between Arizona and California, and since they had an in with the owner of Main Street B & B, what better place to stay? “Until I’m too old to handle the stairs,” her dad had said.

“You have a big job to do,” Luke reminds T.J. now.

He nods. “I know. I gotta take care of Miter. I’ll feed him and walk him—”

“Not without Grandpop,” Beth reminds him in a stern voice. “No taking off on your own.”

“I promise.”

“And you’ll help Grandma around here, won’t you? The entire week is booked.”

T.J. nods then his focus is on Luke. “Since you and Mom are married now, can I?”

Beth’s gaze shifts from T.J. to Luke and back to T.J. “Can you what?”

“Mr. Luke said that when you’re married, I can call him Dad. So can I?”

Beth swallows a sudden lump, and tears burn her eyes.

Luke sweeps a finger down a loose lock of Beth’s hair. “Is that okay with you? I should have discussed it with you before, but I wasn’t sure—”

“It’s perfect,” she whispers, her eyes locking with Luke’s. “I

couldn't ask for a better father for my son."

Luke hugs her close while tousling T.J.'s hair. "Dad it is."

"Yay." T.J. pumps a little fist in the air. "I gotta go tell Miter. We're brothers now." He scampers off, maneuvering through the crowd.

"So, Mrs. Kingsford." Luke brushes a kiss on Beth's temple. "You ready to start our new life?"

"Absolutely." Beth gazes into the face of the man she held contempt for only a year ago. Every prayer she has is filled with gratitude. Because even in the midst of tragedy, God has a plan beyond what she can fathom—beauty from ashes. It's a new season, beyond anything she could have imagined.